

Africa: Deadliest disease goes undetected

Pneumonia and other lung infections are the number-one killers of children worldwide - deadlier than AIDS, malaria and measles combined, but in developing countries lacking medical staff and laboratories the illnesses are often treated blindly with antibiotics.

DAKAR, 27 February 2009 (IRIN) - Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation recently announced it will give US\$40 million to improve screenings for pneumococcal disease - the most common forms being pneumonia and meningitis.

In five developing countries yet to be selected, Gates Foundation will pay for laboratories to use screening techniques such as inflating children's lungs with mist to get lung samples, and MassTag PCR technology to test for up to 30 causes of infection.

Samba Sow, the director of Mali's Centre for Vaccine Development, told IRIN that improving diagnostics is just as critical to saving lives as vaccines. "A given vaccine will cure only certain serotypes [strains]. Few [sub-Saharan African] countries can say 'here is the data, this is the vaccine we need.'"

The World Health Organization (WHO) in August 2008 approved the use of a pneumococcus vaccine in 72 countries that qualify for donations from the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI).

The alliance plans in 2009 to offer vaccines - donated by Wyeth Pharmaceuticals - that protect against seven strains of the lung disease - 1.3 million in Rwanda and 500,000 in The Gambia.

Read the full article here <http://www.IRINnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=83188>