

Press release

South Africa has one of the world's worst tuberculosis (TB) epidemics and one of its main drivers is HIV. Among the 22 countries with the highest burden of TB, SA has the highest estimated incidence and prevalence of TB. A recent report released by the South African National Department of Health states more than 300 000 cases on TB are reported annually.

It further reads: "Moreover, multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR TB) and extremely drug resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB) is on the increase with more than 10 000 and 500 cases reported annually respectively.

"This is compounded by the high HIV burden with co-infection rates estimated at 62 percent. South Africa ... contributes 80 percent of the total global burden of all TB cases."

These alarming statistics required an urgent national intervention from various health entities stakeholders. One of the major interventions came from the South African Medical Research Council (SA MRC) when they announced they will be funding and establishing ten new TB and HIV Collaborating Centres in an effort to address these devastating epidemics.

The Advancing Care and Treatment (ACT) for TB/HIV collaboration is one out of the ten prestigious collaborating centres to be awarded funding. The collaboration was launched at the SA AIDS Conference this year and is the largest and most powerful centre due to the entities it comprises of.

The ACT for TB/HIV collaboration brings together a cross-disciplinary consortium of TB and HIV experts with complimentary interests and skills to do transformative and translational TB and HIV research that will advance understanding, contribute to developing new tools and interventions to improve patient, programme and population relevant outcomes and build capacity of early stage investigators. Our mathematical modelling suggests that South Africa may achieve WHO targets for TB incidence and mortality by 2025 using existing tools.

The collaboration held its first meeting on the 3rd of August at The Aurum Institute and it was attended by renowned researchers and academics in the fields of TB and HIV, namely Professor Gavin Churchyard, Professor Bavesh Kana, Professor Thumbi Ndung'u, Dr Vinodh Edward, and Dr Salome Charalambous – to name but a few. A number of issues were discussed at this meeting which included: how the collaboration will achieve its goals, the areas of work and how the partners will leverage on each other's skills.

The purpose of the ACT for TB/HIV is to use the partnerships fostered in both the ACT for TB/HIV collaboration and the other 9 MRC-funded collaboration centres to leverage funding in niche research areas.

Dr Vinodh Edward is The Aurum Institute's Deputy Director of Clinical Research, and will double as the Chief Operations Officer for the collaboration. He maintains that a high standard has been set for the collaboration team and that all the collaborations will work together tirelessly to deal with the two epidemics that are facing the country. "We are confident our work will have a lasting impact on how the country and continent can deal with both HIV and TB," said Dr Edward.

One of the studies mentioned in the application to the SA MRC, Host-directed Therapy (HDT) by Dr Robert Wallis, has already been granted funding through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the study will be conducted at the Tembisa and Setshaba sites as well as partnering with another SA MRC-funded collaboration in the use of their sites.

The ACT for TB/HIV collaboration feels immensely privileged to be a part of the grander concept that the SA MRC has regarding the initiating and funding of collaborating centres and looks forward to working closely with the SA MRC in the future.

For more information, please visit the SA MRC ACT for TB/HIV website at <http://act4tbhiv.org/>