

## THE BIRTH OF AN AFRICAN CONSORTIUM TO DISCOVER AN HIV VACCINE

What happens when some of the best minds in HIV Vaccine research come together to respond to a USAID Notice of Funding Opportunity? The BRILLIANT Consortium is born! Successfully applying for a cooperative agreement to implement the HIV Vaccine Innovation, Science, and Technology Acceleration in Africa (HIV-VISTA) Project, this diverse group of partners co-created a proposal, characterized by deeply thoughtful Community Engagement, to spearhead vaccine development, (including immunogen and adjuvant design and identification of appropriate platforms and delivery mechanisms); conduct preclinical studies to determine the safety, toxicity and immunogenicity of immunogens and adjuvants in animal studies; and finally conduct clinical trials using novel vaccine formulations, adjuvant combinations and delivery methods.



## CUTTING THROUGH THE JARGON & GETTING TO THE POINT!

From the proposal development stage we knew that one thing we would need to get right was building our collective literacy in vaccinology and immunology. As a first step we identified a selection of key terms that matter to us in BRILLIANT, broke them down just for you, and thought about this all! In this explainer set we check out over 40 terms and cut through the jargon to tell you why they matter - and why we care! Check out the full set in our next newsletter!



## A BRILLIANT PARTNERSHIP

On the 21st of September 2023, the South African Medical Research Council, announced that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) had awarded the BRILLIANT Consortium up to US\$45 million to implement the HIV Vaccine Innovation, Science, and Technology Acceleration in Africa (HIV-VISTA) programme.

(L-R) Paloma Adams-Allen (Deputy Administrator of the USAID), Prof Glenda Gray (SAMRC President and CEO) and Reuben Brigety (United States Ambassador to South Africa).



**DON'T MISS A BEAT!**  
GET THE **eVERSION** HERE!



This newsletter is compiled by the African Alliance, GALZ and MURWP, the BRILLIANT Consortium's Community Engagement Leadership Team.

# A BRILLIANT FIRST MEETING!

The first in-person meeting of the Consortium was held on the 22 & 23 January 2024 in Cape Town, South Africa. The meeting brought together the partners of the Consortium to strategize and plan their Year 1 activities. Each workstream in the Consortium focuses on specific objectives and some of the activities for Year 1 included;

1. To carry out an evaluation of skills amongst advocates and community stakeholders for the purpose of developing an advocacy agenda for BRILLIANT.

2. To identify/select existing immunogens and adjuvants available for evaluation in BRILLIANT.
3. To map existing lab capabilities and resources at BRILLIANT consortium and partner sites (incl. ADVANCE sites) in Africa and prepare selected laboratories to participate in BRILLIANT clinical trials.

BRILLIANT Consortium Partners at the in person meeting in Cape Town, South Africa



# THE BRILLIANT WAY...

## A NEW APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN VACCINE TRIALS

UNAIDS estimates that 70% of the world's 38million people living with HIV, live in Africa. Even with highly effective interventions, such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), HIV persists. HIV disproportionately affects people who have constrained power in society, such as young women, transgender people and people who use drugs. An HIV vaccine offers significant hope: there can be durable immunity and an end to the intractable epidemic. The discovery of a sufficiently effective HIV vaccine remains elusive and requires a multi-disciplinary effort, and - due to the asymmetrical HIV burden on women in Sub-Saharan Africa - a women-led, African-led approach. And even that approach will not work without the communities, which make research possible.

Scientific breakthroughs depend on meaningful community engagement and this is at the centre of the BRILLIANT Consortium's work.

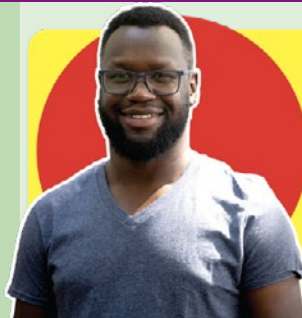
# SPEND A DAY WITH ME...

## AT A CLINICAL TRIAL SITE

As you will find out in the coming weeks, the BRILLIANT Consortium works alongside some really cool clinical research sites. To ensure that sites are aware of (and ready for!) all of the BRILLIANT research coming their way the Consortium visits the sites. You can see a map with all of our BRILLIANT sites here.

As part of the groundwork for BRILLIANT 001, Community Activists participated in site visits to evaluate community engagement practices, recruitment strategies, and the consent process in the context of Phase 1 HIV vaccine trials. The Community Engagement Workstream team interacted extensively with the different sites staff and community representatives to gather insights into operational effectiveness and community integration.

Barrack Owino, our Partnerships and Advocacy Lead, joined the site assessment team at the Kenya Medical Research Institute-Walter Reed Project CRS in Kericho, Kenya. Here, he revisits his time at the site.



“  
*Hi there, I'm Barrack!*  
The African Alliances Partnerships & Advocacy Lead.

On 10th June I traveled to Kericho. Kericho is the biggest town in Kericho County, located in the highlands west of the Kenyan Rift Valley, Kenya. Here, amidst the surrounding neighborhoods of green tea farms, lies the Kenya Medical Research Institute-Walter Reed Project Clinical Research Site, within the city.



Site Assessment Visit Team at Kenya Medical Research Institute-Walter Reed Project CRS

The KEMRI-WRP Community Engagement Site Assessment Visit in a nutshell

# IMAGE OF THE MONTH



South Africa's HIV research power couple say the fight goes on

World-renowned researchers and Directors of the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA), Professors Quarrisha Abdool Karim and Salim Abdool Karim received the prestigious Lasker Award for public service, a top recognition for medical research described as the US equivalent of a Nobel prize for science. CAPRISA is a leading member of the BRILLIANT Consortium, with the eThekweni CAPRISA Clinical Research Site designated as a site for BRILLIANT 001.

This scientific power couple are prominent South African scientists renowned for their groundbreaking research in HIV/AIDS and microbicides. Salim, an epidemiologist and infectious diseases specialist, has played a pivotal role in shaping public health policies in South Africa and globally.

Quarraisha, an accomplished biostatistician and researcher, has been instrumental in advancing the understanding of HIV prevention methods, particularly through microbicides. Together, they have made significant contributions to the fight against HIV, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they provided crucial insights into public health responses and vaccine development, and were instrumental in how we collectively responded to the pandemic. Their tireless efforts have garnered international recognition, culminating in this prestigious award to celebrate their dedication to improving global health. Stay tuned for our third edition where we profile Professor Nigel Garrett, Head of the CAPRISA HIV Pathogenesis and Vaccine Research Programme has been appointed Leader of the CAPRISA eThekweni Research Site (ECRS).

Professors Quarraisha and Salim Abdool Karim at the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA) in Durban. (Photo by Phill Magakoe / AFP)

## MEET THE CEA CO-LEADS: MARTHA, STEPHEN & TIAN!

The Community Engagement & Advocacy Workstream of the Consortium is led by Martha Tholanah, Stephen Mugamba and Tian Johnson.



# THE BIG PICTURE

The BRILLIANT Consortium consists of three workstreams that report to an Executive Committee, which in turn reports to the highest decision-making body, the Scientific Advisory Group (SAG).

### Community Engagement & Advocacy (CEA)

The Consortium's efforts begin with Community Engagement & Advocacy. The objective of the workstream is to partner with civil society advocates, HIV-affected communities including those at-risk and PLWH, policymakers, and communicators to advance African-led HIV vaccine science.

### Clinical

The objective of this workstream is to design and implement innovative, early-stage clinical trials using an HIV vaccine discovery approach to assess safety & immunogenicity while accelerating the development of an effective broadly neutralizing antibody (bnAb) inducing HIV vaccine regimen.

### Lab & Vaccine Design

The objective of this workstream is to assess immune responses to HIV immunogens in clinical trials and develop novel immunogens for preclinical testing.

There are two cross-cutting components, Capacity Augmentation and MEL (Monitoring & Evaluation).

### Capacity Augmentation

This cross-cutting component utilizes and strengthens the capabilities and resources of BRILLIANT collaborating institutions to successfully conduct project activities as outlined in the BRILLIANT HIV vaccine proposal to address BRILLIANT goals. Capacity Augmentation is embedded in each of the other 3 workstreams ensuring that each program fully utilizes and strengthens systems of collaborations for HIV vaccine research in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### MEL (Monitoring & Evaluation)

The MEL system is designed to support transparency and accountability across the Consortium. It guides how all consortium members will support regular progress reporting and ensures compliance with USAID's policies and federal regulations. A key differentiator of BRILLIANT's MEL work was the hosting of the Consortium's MEL Lead within the Community Workstream. Acknowledgement goes to Elizabeth Chigwidi, who oversaw the inception and year one MEL activities. This role provided high level monitoring, evaluation and learning support for the BRILLIANT Consortium, which included managing the MEL Plan and Indicator table for the project as well as supporting all reporting activities for the Consortium.



# WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR IN 2024

...FROM THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & ADVOCACY WORKSTREAM OF BRILLIANT



# THE PROTOCOL

All clinical trials are guided by a master plan, which consists of rules, guidelines, and a statement of intent. This document serves as a crucial source of information about the key questions of the trials: What? Who? Why? Where? and How?

We have called our first trial under the BRILLIANT Consortium, 001. This means that the trial will be now known as BRILLIANT-001 which shows you the name of the trial and its number.

To keep activists, researchers and other stakeholders accountable, everyone must be able to understand the protocol of a trial. Ideally, as many stakeholders as possible should be involved from the protocol design stage. This ensures that communities not only have a seat at the table, but are able to see their voices, concerns and questions addressed in the final protocol. **A transparent protocol = A transparent trial!**

So this is what we are doing - A Community Guide to the BRILLIANT 001 Protocol is being developed by the Community Engagement Workstream. This resource is designed to assist groups or individuals to understand a science heavy protocol. This guide will break down what the Protocol is all about and is targeted at Community Activists. It will include a clear explanation of the protocol's purpose.

## BRILLIANT 001

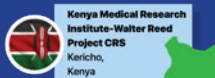
### THE FIRST JEWEL IN OUR CROWN!

**BRILLIANT 001 is the product that the Consortium will be taking into Phase 1 studies.**

A scientific protocol is a detailed plan or set of procedures designed to guide research. A Community Guide to the BRILLIANT 001 Protocol is being developed by the Community Engagement Workstream. This resource is designed to assist groups or individuals to understand a science heavy protocol. This guide will break down what the Protocol is all about and is targeted at Community Activists. It will include a clear explanation of the protocol's purpose.



## BRILLIANT 001 SITES



## What Can You Expect In The Next Edition?

- **Meet Jothie:** the BRILLIANT Community Engagement and Advocacy Coordinator - a reflection by Anna Matendawafa
- **Spend a day with me, Perrykent Nkole** at a clinical trial site - Focus on CIRDS Lusaka Matero Site in Zambia
- **We profile our first BRILLIANT Site** - meet the Community Activist & Scientist of J52 DTHF Groote Schuur Site!
- **Check out our Protocol Explainer:** Welcome to BRILLIANT 001
- **Meet our newest implementing partner!**
- The People of BRILLIANT - The Podcast series

# A BRILLIANT READ

**IF YOU READ ONE THING THIS MONTH LET IT BE THIS!**

A key part of our work in BRILLIANT is the support we offer to young scientists. Two of the young scientists from the Joint Clinical Research Centre (JCRC) Clinical Research Site in Uganda, Andrew Ekiee Obuku and Annritah Namuganga, were sent on a tech transfer program to the Amsterdam University Medical Center. The purpose of the 3-month program was to learn how to develop immunogens. As we do this critical work to build the field we will continue amplifying the amazing groups, who like BRILLIANT, know that our future is dependent on making sure everyone, especially Black African women, have the space, support, resources and solidarity they need to make our future BRILLIANT. Stay tuned for more in the upcoming Editions of Kipaji!

**We also celebrate others who are doing the same!**

Check out Francine's story below in this edition's BRILLIANT READ!!

## FRANCINE NTOUMI

### IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEMALE SCIENTISTS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

In the heart of the Republic of Congo's capital Brazzaville, lies the Congolese Foundation for Medical Research. This laboratory was founded by Professor Francine Ntoumi, a woman who has dedicated her life to strengthening health research capacities in Africa.

Born in Brazzaville, she studied and worked in France and has conducted research in Gabon, the Netherlands, Germany, Tanzania and her home country, Congo. She has served a range of institutions as Coordinator of the Multilateral Initiative on Malaria, the first African leader and in other various capacities.

Francine Ntoumi (second from left) in her lab with a group of her students. Credit: Francine Ntoumi



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