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WHO Advisory Committee on Variola Virus Research

Report of the Fourteenth Meeting

Geneva, Switzerland
16–17 October 2012

World Health Organization

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Executive summary

Variola virus research performed under supervision of WHO was presented to the WHO Advisory Committee on Variola Virus Research. It may be summarized as follows.

The Committee noted that the work under the authorized programme of research with variola virus had been done under its supervision. In 2012, nine projects had been approved by its scientific subcommittee and progress reports were presented at the meeting.

The Committee received reports on the virus collection held at the two WHO Collaborating Centres authorized as repositories of variola virus: the State Research Center for Virology and Biotechnology (Russian Federation) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (United States of America).

In addition, the Committee received updates from three pharmaceutical companies on advanced candidate vaccines and antivirals. Information presented included data on efficacy, safety, stability and large-scale manufacturing capacity. Work is continuing on the studies that are needed in order to satisfy the requirements for eventual regulatory approval.

The Committee heard that limited progress had been made in establishing a laboratory network for diagnosis of smallpox and other orthopoxvirus infections due to a variety of logistic issues. WHO informed the Committee that Headquarters and Regional Offices will identify and select facilities with appropriate capacities for this purpose from existing diagnostic laboratories for dangerous pathogens.

A variola-virus-specific diagnostic test based on existing tests and with the capacity to distinguish between variola and other poxviruses is being refined.

Both authorized repositories of variola virus were inspected during 2012 and the final reports of these biosafety inspections will be posted on the WHO web site. The protocol used followed the European Committee for Standardization's Laboratory Biorisk Management Standard CWA 15793:2011 and addressed 16 elements of laboratory biorisk management.

1. Opening

1.1. The 14th meeting of the WHO Advisory Committee on Variola Virus Research (ACVVR) took place in WHO Headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland, from 16 to 17 October 2012 with Professor G.L. Smith as Chairman and Dr R. Drillien as Rapporteur. Dr K. Fukuda, WHO Assistant Director-General for Health Security and Environment welcomed participants on behalf of WHO. Dr Fukuda reminded the Committee of the 2007 World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution 60.1, which noted that authorization was granted to permit essential research for global public health benefit including further research into antiviral agents and safer vaccines. He thanked the ACVVR for conducting yearly reviews of the research programmes involving live variola virus. He reminded the Committee that nine proposals for research on live virus had been submitted and reviewed by the ACVVR scientific subcommittee since the last meeting and that progress in each area would be presented at this meeting. He informed the Committee that inspections of the two WHO Collaborating Centres had been carried out in 2012. The reports of these inspections would shortly be made publicly available. He also reminded the Committee that an operational framework for distributing the current vaccine stockpiles administered by WHO including both physical stocks in Geneva and vaccines pledged to WHO was being set up according to standardized operating procedures.

2. Report of the Secretariat

2.1. Dr A. Costa presented the report of the WHO Secretariat. He recalled that biosafety inspections of the two WHO Collaborating Centres had been carried out in 2012 at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), United States of America, during 7–11 May and at VECTOR, Russian Federation, during 3–10 October. He summarized the strategic preparedness plan that was being revised by WHO since the beginning of 2012 to deal with any smallpox outbreak. The plan included the handling of vaccine stockpiles, the creation of a diagnostic laboratory network, the identification of appropriate assays and the sharing of information between experts. He indicated that the Smallpox Laboratory Network would be included within the WHO dangerous pathogens network to ensure efficient use of resources. Dr Costa informed the Committee that WHO has consulted with the countries which pledged vaccines in order to ensure emergency coordination of, and access to, the