The Role of Community Engagement in the Success of the First Clinical Malaria Vaccine Trials in Equatorial Guinea

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In 2015, the Equatorial Guinea Malaria Vaccine Initiative (EGMVI) conducted the first ever clinical trial in Equatorial Guinea (EG) to evaluate the safety and immunogenicity of Sanaria PfSPZ Vaccine® in healthy young adults (18-35 years). This paved the way for the second PfSPZ Vaccine® trial to evaluate safety and immunogenicity in participants aged 6 months to 65 years, and a head-to-head comparison of safety, immunogenicity and efficacy between PfSPZ Vaccine® and PfSPZ-CVacc® in young adults (18-35 years) (Sanaria, Inc.). Because these were the first clinical trials ever conducted in EG, community engagement played a critical role in gaining the trust of local government officials, health workers, and community members. Tapping into existing local social systems facilitated access to study participants living in the targeted communities. During the community engagement, it was important to distinguish between existing, traditional malaria control interventions, e.g. bed nets and indoor spraying, and the research of investigational products such as the candidate malaria vaccines. Several challenges were encountered during the recruitment of study participants, particularly stemming from the influence that political factors and donors had on community perceptions. Understanding the purpose, procedures and potential risks and benefits of the study through sensitization meetings increased community involvement and willingness to participate in the trials. Building on the lessons learned from the first trial, community engagement resulted in high acceptance and positive feedback from the community in the second trial, in which 135 volunteers including infants were successfully recruited within 28 weeks. An effective community engagement strategy enabled the EGMVI to successfully recruit study subjects for the first malaria vaccine trials in the history of the country, and has enabled the nation to contribute to scientific research on the whole sporozoite malaria vaccines. Key points will include trust building, community-based health education and communication, and community engagement strategy models.