

RESEARCH | World on verge of medical breakthrough

Malaria vaccine launch tomorrow

Kenyan infants among those to be honoured for their input to the world's most advanced jab

BY GATONYE GATHURA
gathura@ke.nationmedia.com

The contribution made by hundreds of children and infants from Nyanza and Kilifi to the world's most advanced malaria vaccine will be made public tomorrow evening in the United States.

The preliminary findings of a three-year study involving about 15,460 children aged between five and 17 months, from Kenya, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania will be announced in Seattle, Washington.

Depending on tomorrow's announcement of the phase III clinical

THE NUMBERS

Fully effective vaccine expected by 2025

15,460 53pc 65pc

Number of children involved in the three-year study

Reduction in malaria infection in children for eight months

Reduction in malaria infection in infants for six months

trials, the world could be on the verge of getting its first malaria vaccine called RTS,S.

Results of previous clinical studies have shown that RTS,S reduced the risk of malaria infection by 53 per cent over eight months, and 65 per cent over six months, in children and infants, respectively.

Tomorrow's announcement is expected to build on this and most likely open the way for a process that could lead to a commercial malaria vaccine

within the next four years.

Discussing current developments last week at a national malaria forum, Dr Patricia Njuguna, the RTS,S principal investigator at the Kenya Medical Research Institute's Kilifi Centre, said the studies had progressed well.

A vaccine that would offer 50 per cent year-long protection against malaria may be possible within four years, she said. By 2025, Dr Njuguna said, an upgraded vaccine offering 80 per cent protection for many years

may also be available.

But tomorrow's announcement will be made amid a gathering storm with some scientists raising concern over the vaccine's effectiveness, side-effects and the wisdom of using young children in the trials.

According to the October issue of *NewAfrica* magazine, Dr Mae-Wah Ho and Prof Joe Cummins of the London-based Institute of Science in Society raised safety and ethical concern over RTS,S trials some two years ago.

Serious concerns

In an investigative article by Kenyan writer Wanjohi Kabukuru, the scientists say clinical trials of malaria vaccines on infants raise serious concerns over the safety of multiple vaccinations of the very young.

But Dr Njuguna, according to the magazine, is categorical that her teams followed the laid down procedures "to the letter".