

# Amgen and AfricaBio present webinar series on increasing genetic diversity in clinical trials in Africa

Efforts must be coordinated to tackle the challenge of inclusion and representation of Africans

**O**n 12 January 2021, the erstwhile chairperson of the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on Covid-19 Professor Salim Abdool Karim issued the renowned “I let my country down” public apology, where he stated his regret for not encouraging South Africa to join the vaccine development race with its own vaccine candidate back in July of 2020. The public apology was also a direct response to the dominant public discourse of much criticism against the scientific community in South Africa, and Africa as a whole, for failing to design, test and manufacture what could be seen as a Covid-19 vaccine for Africans.

While this criticism was seeded by the general mistrust among Africans of products, funders, and pharmaceutical companies from the Global North, and later promoted by the growing anti-vaccine sentiments of the day, it also highlighted the growing need for technological interventions designed in Africa, by Africans, for Africans. When vaccines did finally become available, Africa was not able to procure doses timeously because priority in vaccine distribution was given to countries in the Global North, including vaccine vials that were filled and packaged in South Africa.

The delay in vaccine supply to Africa, refusal to waive intellectual property, and the exorbitant

costs African countries had to pay for vaccine doses, including requirements for non-disclosure agreements, all served to exacerbate the mistrust in products seen as “Western” by Africans, and contribute to the bigger problem of vaccine hesitancy. In truth, we are yet to fully grasp the cost of vaccine inequity between the Global North and the Global South.

However, we do know that Africa needs to strengthen its manufacturing of vaccines, as well as other medical products and devices. We have now seen multiple efforts by the World Health Organization and pharmaceutical companies to invest in the value chain of biotechnology and manufacturing in several African countries, including South Africa. A crucial element in this value chain is the conduct of clinical trials to test medical products and devices, and in this regard, South Africa is considered a global leader.

The unprecedented speed with which Covid-19 trials were conducted, of which South Africa was a part, left much to be desired in terms of public trust in clinical trials, including in much of Africa. To achieve the goal of health innovation and biotechnology development in Africa, by Africans and for Africans, the work of rebuilding trust and confidence in clinical trials needs to resume in earnest, and the process should necessarily

involve a series of engagements with a very broad and diverse collective of stakeholders.

Such engagements will have to demonstrate the interconnectedness of healthcare and research, and the risks of under-representation in health innovation and research. The more we know biologically or otherwise about an individual or a group, the more precise our approach to their healthcare can be, also termed the practice of “precision medicine”. Therefore, the imperative to ensure diversity and inclusion in clinical trials goes to the very heart of the healthcare service delivery mandate in Africa.

On 24 May 2022, an association of biotechnology stakeholders in Africa, AfricaBio, held a webinar on the importance of diversity in clinical trials chaired by its president Dr Nhlamhla Msomi, which highlighted the under-representation of Africa in clinical trials. The webinar was attended by a range of stakeholders, and was co-hosted with Amgen, a bi-pharmaceutical company in the US.

On 28 July, AfricaBio and Amgen will co-host a second webinar in the series, focusing on genomic diversity, precision medicine and the establishment of a biobank in Africa. According to the Framework for the implementation of Genomic Medicine for Public Health in Africa,

published on 8 February 2021, the required infrastructure for Africa to reach global standards is vast, complex and expensive, but some of the pieces are already in place for some countries (including South Africa), albeit at a basic level through existing health systems and recently developed infrastructure. The report concludes by calling for national coordination of efforts through the broader ecosystem of government, health, science, education, policy, and industry partners, in order to tackle this enormous challenge of inclusion and representation of Africans – one bite at a time.

To register for the webinar on 28 July 2022 please scan the QR code below

