

University collaboration reaches promising Covid-19 vaccine results

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Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and the North-West University (NWU) jointly announced "very promising first results" from preclinical trials on a new Covid-19 vaccine candidate on Tuesday, 8 June.



The WSU Medical School has a rich history of producing quality medical doctors and nurses for the South African and international health systems. The NWU, on the hand, has over the years established a strong reputation in drug development and research, as well as in the training of healthcare professionals.

The DNA vaccine candidate was developed by Germany-based, Professor Markus Depfenhart, who holds extraordinary appointments as professor at both universities.

The trials, which are being conducted at the Pre-Clinical Drug Development Platform at the NWU, are well advanced and promising. The trial and the analyses will continue over the following weeks.

"Of course, we are excited," said Professor Rushiella Songca, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of WSU. "But it is about much more than a vaccine candidate. It's about building capacity on the African Continent, collaborating, and installing confidence in our scientists that everything seems impossible until you achieve it. We're learning, by the day, every step of the process. We look forward to a strong future collaboration resulting from this initiative and strengthening bonds in the pan-African research and innovation community. We can no longer afford to work in isolation from one another on the continent – we need links and partnerships to grow and succeed."

DNA vaccines are relatively inexpensive and straightforward to manufacture, can be adjusted quickly to address mutations and offer a simple yet effective means of inducing broad-based immunity. Since they are stable at ambient temperature without a cold chain for storage and shipping, they are a desirable vaccination platform, almost ideal for all conditions on our continent.

Professor Dan Kgwadi, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the NWU added: "we are very excited by this milestone that the NWU-WSU partnership has achieved. We look forward to working with more institutions in South Africa and across our continent to ensure efficient and effective responses to pandemics and other health challenges. For us, the collaboration with Walter Sisulu University and other institutions on our continent serves to demonstrate our commitment towards achieving our dream – to be an internationally recognised university in Africa, distinguished for engaged scholarship, social responsiveness and an ethic of care. We continue to prove that the foundations for the NWU Medical School are in place and ready to be harnessed further. We remain confident that the leadership and guidance of our chancellor, Dr Anna Mokgokong and the NWU Council under the leadership of Dr Bismark Tyobeka, will steer us towards even more positive developments that will benefit the rest of our continent."

Professor Awie Kotzé, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the NWU, thanked Professor Depfenhart and the collaborative team for their work on the project and expressed his trust that it will be the first of many collaborative projects with WSU. "...and we express our special appreciation to Prof. Depfenhart, who has had to lead this project from Hamburg, Germany, because of the extended Covid-travel restrictions. He has a big impact on our two universities. He is a driving force in bringing together a new pan-African, multi-national platform around vaccines and epidemic responses in Africa, by Africa, for Africa."

Advocate Tembeka Ngcukaitobi (SC), the Chairperson of the WSU Council, has expressed his support for the initiative as follows: "The impact of Covid-19 has been devastating to the world. For Africa and the developing world, inequalities, poverty, and deprivation have worsened. Unequal access to the vaccine has also highlighted these global inequities. Africa, then, finds itself, perhaps once again, having to rely on its own intellectual capital to navigate its way through the global crisis. In this context, words cannot describe how exceedingly pleased I am, not only at the promising results of the animal trials but at the idea that WSU is at the cutting edge of scientific innovation. It is hoped that the promising results of this trial will not be limited to WSU and NWU but will carry significance for other African universities and the developing world as a whole. As we move towards the next phase of this project, we hope to enter into meaningful partnerships with other institutions which share our vision and aspirations for the advancement of humanity."

Professor Songca confirms that the two universities have also assembled a collaborative consortium comprising the most outstanding research institutes and scientists in Africa and Europe to tackle pandemic response in Africa. "You'll have to watch this space. We'll jointly be announcing exciting developments in the next weeks, which we will communicate to the public and the science community once finalised. I, for one, am exceptionally proud of the work already undertaken and the promising results we have achieved together as WSU and NWU."

The universities are also expected to make available updated trial results over the next weeks.

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