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University of Geneva makes progress against the tsetse fly

In partnership with the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND), researchers from the University of Geneva have discovered a marker for the detection of sleeping sickness.

by Fabrice Delaye

“Everything went very fast.” Giorgio Roscigno still cannot believe it. In the space of five months, the collaboration between FIND, the Geneva-based NGO that he runs and is financed by Bill Gates, and Jean-Charles Sanchez’s research group from the Faculty of Medicine in Geneva has produced an initial result.

This result opens the way to developing a cheap diagnostic tool (like the pregnancy test) to detect sleeping sickness, which affects between 40,000 and 50,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa every year.

Specialized in the study of proteins in the cerebral system, Jean-Charles Sanchez’s team has identified a molecule whose density indicates which stage the disease is at. “This is critical,” explains Giorgio Roscigno. “Only two drugs exist to treat sleeping sickness: one is effective in the early stage and has no secondary effects; the other, highly toxic (causing the death of the patient in 8% of cases), is effective when the disease has entered the central nervous system.”

Financing humanitarian research

This discovery will be added to the pipeline of new diagnostics for diseases that affect poor countries, which FIND has been financing for five years. If subsequent tests among humans are conclusive, this detection method will join molecular diagnostic tests, like the ones for different forms of tuberculosis and malaria: diagnostics that FIND has developed in collaboration with companies like Roche, Hain, Cepheid and Eiken.

This NGO’s philosophy is to finance research for diagnostics for these diseases, then clinical trials in operational conditions like the ones that were conducted in Africa on 120,000 and 30,000 people against tuberculosis and malaria respectively. In exchange, FIND’s industrial partners pledge to sell the new diagnostic tests to poor countries at a good price while reserving their margins in developed markets.