

Developing World Gets Diagnostics R&D Fund

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FIND is the new word in diagnostics for the new world. The Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics was launched this week, spearheaded by the World Health Organization (WHO), with the aim of meeting the "critical need for more: accurate and cost-effective diagnostic technologies, particularly for diseases of the developing world".

The WHO's Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR), the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank and the Gates Foundation, will work in collaboration with the diagnostics industry, health organizations and the governments of the affected nations to "apply the latest biotechnology innovations to develop and validate affordable diagnostic tests for diseases of the developing world".

"The biotechnology advances of the past 20 years provide an opportunity to transform the way we diagnose and treat disease in the world's poorest countries," said Dr Giorgio Roscigno, FIND's executive director, referring to a "new generation of diagnostics that will greatly improve the tracking and treatment of deadly infectious diseases".

The Gates Foundation has already pledged to spend US\$30m over the next five years on the initiative. "This kind of public-private partnership is essential for bringing the latest health technologies to bear on the diseases of the developing world," said Dr Helene Gayle, director of HIV, TB and reproductive health at the Gates Foundation.

The FIND programme will focus initially on TB, which remains the WHO's top priority in light of the global incidence of the disease -an estimated one-third of the world's population carries the TB pathogen -and the shortcomings of existing health systems to handle cases. The standard method for TB detection, by examining sputum under a microscope, was developed over a century ago, is time-consuming and frequently inaccurate, says the WHO.

"We are 100 years behind in TB diagnostics. The technology and know-how is there. A focused and coordinated effort could ensure the speedy development of high quality and affordable tools," said Dr Mark Perkins, scientific director of FIND.

"The recent outbreak of SARS illustrates the need for easy-to-use and accurate diagnostics to aid in the control of infectious disease," said Dr Carlos Morel, director of the TDR. Separately, the WHO has rallied the business community, especially in South East Asia, to help improve