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Testing times

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A new organisation should help the diagnosis of diseases in poor countries

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WILLIAM OSLER, one of the founders of modern medicine, observed that the best means of diagnosis was one finger in the throat and one in the rectum. Things have moved on since then, at least in rich countries. But in the world's poorest places modern diagnostic technology is in short supply.

Take tuberculosis (TB), for example. The standard method of diagnosis is a microscopic hunt in a sample of sputum for the bacteria that cause the disease. Even when a country can afford the equipment and people to do this, it is a time-consuming and inaccurate procedure. As a result, many patients are well into the disease by the time they are diagnosed, a delay that not only undermines their chance of recovery, but also exposes their neighbours to infection.

There is thus a need for fast, accurate and affordable diagnostics for the diseases which hit the poor hardest. What has been lacking, so far, is much international co-ordination and funding to develop and distribute these where they are required. No longer: May 22nd saw the launch of the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND), which draws on the World Health Organisation's expertise in infectious disease, and on \$30m from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Over the next five years, the foundation will focus on bringing better tests for TB into the field, before moving on to other poor-country afflictions, such as malaria.

As Mark Perkins, the scientific director of FIND, points out, there are plenty of ideas for new diagnostic tests in academic centres and biotechnology companies around the world. For TB alone, more than 50 firms are developing or already selling tests that might be useful in poor places. These include dipsticks that can detect antibodies to TB bacteria, patch tests that reveal infection by the way the skin reacts to bits of those bacteria, and DNA chips which can identify the germ from its genes.

The problem is that most of these firms (and also the academic groups) are too small to do the research needed to adapt their ideas for use in poor countries, let alone make them in bulk for Africa, Asia and Latin America and push them over regulatory hurdles in those places. FIND's role is to bring governments, firms and universities together, and give them enough money to do the job. Providing developing countries with better access to expensive, life-saving drugs has become an international rallying cry. Combined with better diagnostics, these medicines could, indeed, make a world of difference.