

Public Health in the News

Tuberculosis drug designed for children nears market

A tuberculosis drug specifically designed for children – combining sweet flavours and the correct dosage in a dissolvable tablet – is expected to hit markets early this year, according to the TB Alliance, a non-governmental organisation. The tablets, which were developed through a partnership between the TB Alliance, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the US government, are meant to improve drug regime adherence among children in the developing world. The drug is not new, but will be an improved combination of existing TB treatments such as rifampicin, isoniazid and pyrazinamide, specifically designed for children.



At a conference in Cape Town, South Africa, in December, TB Alliance representatives told the audience that doctors and parents in many developing countries rely on crushing or splitting tablets with adult dosages when treating children with TB. This means drug dosage is difficult to control and many caregivers struggle to regularly administer the bitter-tasting, sharp-edged tablet fragments for the usual six-month course. “Since the adult tablets were fixed drug combinations it meant redesigning the tablet according to the ratios [for children],” said James Seddon, a paediatric TB researcher at Imperial College, London.

Juliana Odindo, a Kenyan campaigner with Y+, a global network of young people with HIV, said the dissolvable drug is a huge improvement on her own treatments, which involved biting off small pieces of an adult tablet and swallowing them. “It is great news that child-friendly TB medication is finally being made available so that children do not have to gamble with their dosages like I did,” she said.

The WHO estimates that 1 million children fell ill with TB in 2014, and 140,000 died from the disease. However, only around a third of those who catch the disease are officially diagnosed and put on treatment, the organisation warns. According to Brenda Waning, head of global drugs at the Stop TB Partnership, drugs for children with TB make up a low-volume, low-profit market and are therefore not of interest for pharmaceutical companies. However, the partnership behind the child-friendly drug has pooled funding with Unitaid, an international drug purchasing facility overseen by the WHO, to get the product to market.

Manufactured by Indian pharmaceutical company Macleods, the drug is likely to be available early in 2016, the TB Alliance has said. Kenya, which has one of the highest burdens of TB, could be one of the first markets where the drug will be sold, according to Evaline Kibuchi, the TB manager at the Kenya Aids NGOs Consortium. “Our grassroots activists and civil society organisations have been advocating for child-friendly TB drugs over the last year,” she said, adding that the only challenge remaining is approval by Kenya’s government.

Sources: *The Guardian*, 04 January 2016

According to Statistics South Africa, Tuberculosis and HIV-related illnesses were the two leading causes of death among young people in 2013. Of the 77 822 people below the ages of 35 who died in 2013, 10 962 died from TB, 7 890 succumbed to HIV, and “other viral diseases”, which were third on the list, accounted for 4 400 deaths. Implementing effective surveillance mechanisms is one of the main strategies employed in TB Control Programmes in combating the spread of TB amongst youth and adults in the region.

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