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INTREPID's new strategy to help build a pandemic war chest

The INTREPID alliance has abandoned its fundraising plans, but not its mission to expedite antiviral development for future pandemics

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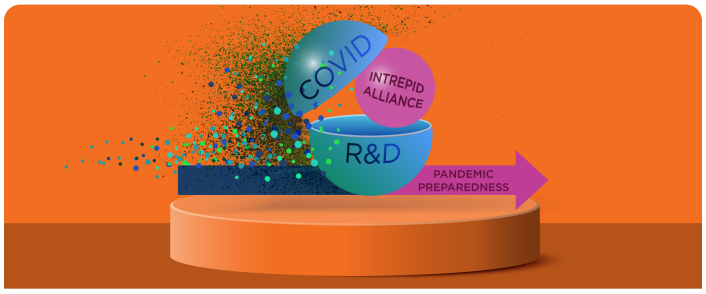

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The antiviral alliance INTREPID has abandoned its lofty $1 billion fundraising goal and instead plans to fulfill its mission to accelerate the pipeline of antivirals against future pandemics by coordinating and supporting the development work of others, strengthening the pandemic ecosystem, and collaborating with the 100 Days Mission.

The International Readiness for Preventing Infectious Viral Disease (INTREPID) alliance, launched in 2021 to provide an umbrella for the development of antivirals against future pandemic threats and create an avenue for companies and investors to channel their good intentions into development programs.

It planned to raise $1 billion to fund a hands-on approach that would see the Alliance strike deals such as royalty agreements with existing antiviral companies, preferred equity in VC-backed start-up platform companies, asset-licensing arrangements to create academic or pharma spinouts, and investments in virtual companies run out of an accelerator or incubator.

At the time, INTREPID members had intended to work precompetitively to standardize protocols and methods, such as for conducting *in vitro* screening and interpretation of results.

Chair James Anderson told BioCentury that the Alliance has since decided against fundraising and the direct funding of discovery and development work.

"The funding landscape has changed quite significantly," he said, citing the Gates Foundation, the Novo Nordisk Foundation, Europe's HERA and Japan's SCARDA as specific examples of funding sources for antiviral development. "It's not clear that funding is the issue, or at least, not the first issue. What's missing is the approach to prioritize or to select promising candidates that could be ready and could make a difference in future pandemics."

Anderson is also executive director at the Global Health, International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers & Associations (IFPMA) and Chair of the AMR Industry Alliance.

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INTREPID Alliance, James Anderson

Rather than in-licensing programs, he said the Alliance believes it can effect change cost-effectively by identifying priority programs, serving in a consulting role, and enabling its individual members to support specific programs where it makes sense for them.

"The model we're trying to purse creates that flexibility for companies to step in different ways that suit their objectives and abilities," he said, Without funds, the options available to the Alliance itself to support programs is "limited," he acknowledged.

Anderson said INTREPID's new approach will run in phases, the first of which is compiling a list of the 25 most-promising candidates that collectively target the 10 viral families considered by the World Health Organization to have the potential to cause future pandemics.

"By bringing together the experts who've developed antivirals in our member companies and who have tremendous expertise in taking other anti-infectives through the R&D pathway, we think we'll provide a lens to look at the landscape and identify those promising candidates we want to include on our list," he said.

Anderson said he anticipates the candidates on the list to fall into one of three categories — those owned and being effectively advanced by a pharma; those owned by a public research institution or university that lacks funding and drug development expertise; and those owned by a small biotech that has some capabilities "but probably needs additional expertise or funding."

According to Anderson, the Alliance anticipates its members taking "a more active role" for compounds that fall into the latter two categories, saying "the membership will have additional options of how they want to get involved" and that this could entail contribution of expertise to in-licensing or partnering.

He added that for high-risk viruses that lack promising drug candidates, "we need to trigger a different conversation" to "catalyze some basic research to start the whole cycle of drug development."

Strengthening the pandemic ecosystem

In addition to supporting antiviral drug development, the Alliance also aims to strengthen the pandemic ecosystem.

In March, it held its inaugural antiviral summit, the goals of which were to maintain the collaborations and good practices among companies, academics, regulators, policymakers, philanthropies and
NGOs that arose during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic; to identify gaps in antiviral research and opportunities for INTREPID to add value; and to foster personal interactions between thought leaders in the field.

The summit's attendees made 25 stakeholder recommendations that were published on July 20 and include the global alignment "across regulatory agencies on protocols, clinical trial design, and criteria for authorizing of medicines in the context of an emergency."

Anderson said the Alliance is working with the 100 Days Mission to ensure the appropriateness of any regulatory and clinical trial strategies that the Mission proposes.

The 100 Days Mission is to make diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines available within 100 days of the emergence of a pandemic threat, and is being advanced by the Independent Pandemic Preparedness Secretariat, an independent body recommended by G7 country scientific advisers.

Anderson cited the development of Veklury remdesivir to treat COVID-19 by Alliance member Gilead Sciences Inc. (NASDAQ:GILD) as "a good model of what we have in mind."

Veklury, which was initially designed to treat Ebola virus, was repurposed to treat COVID-19. It gained emergency use authorization more than two years before the first antiviral designed specifically for the coronavirus infection, Paxlovid nirmatrelvir and ritonavir, and reached patients more than six months before any COVID-specific mAbs.

An example of an innovative clinical trial that could serve as a model for future pandemics was the U.K.'s RECOVERY platform trial for COVID-19, which was created by Oxford University's Martin Landray and Peter Horby. The trial's streamlined protocol recruited over 12,000 patients and produced three results in the first 100 days, including the identification of dexamethasone as an effective treatment for the disease.

Anderson said the Alliance expected to publish its list of 25 antiviral compounds by the end of 2023.