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PRESS RELEASE

Makerere University in Search for HIV/AIDS Drug

Makerere University under the umbrella organization of the Inter-University Council of East Africa has embarked on a new project aimed at producing drugs to alleviate HIV/AIDS in East Africa.

The three year project titled “*Value chain analysis and development of plant-derived medicinal products for management of HIV/AIDS in the face of climate change in the Lake Victoria basin*” is supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and is implemented by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), through the Lake Victoria Research Initiative (VicRes). The project has a budget of USD 600,000.

This project is going to determine and evaluate plants to produce new anti-HIV therapies. And because plants, the sources of traditional medicines, are threatened, this project will also research, demonstrate and promote plant conservation.

This is a regional project with partnering universities in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi. The project is headed by Prof. Philip Aduma of Maseno, Kenya. Professor John Tabuti, an ethnobotanist, of Makerere University College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences is leading the Ugandan team. “*There are three main foci of this study, to discover new medicine to tackle HIV/AIDS, to conserve plants from which traditional medicines are obtained and to improve the market for traditional medicine plants*”. Prof. Tabuti explained.

Prof. Tabuti was speaking during the sensitization workshop at PROMETRA Uganda in Mpigi district while seeking consent of the traditional healers to be involved in the study. The research is being conducted in five districts, that of Mpigi, Kaliro, Palisa, Mukono and Kampala.

In Mpigi district, Buyijja Traditional Healers Association and PROMETRA Uganda, a renowned institute that trains traditional healers on HIV/AIDS and related illnesses consented to participate in the study.

The Director PROMETRA Uganda, Dr. Ssekagya welcomed the move as a positive step towards recognition and respect of herbal medicine. *“This is a very welcome idea of collaborative initiative to add science to traditional medicine. We are looking at value addition, we must be able to explain, look at standards and respect traditional medicine in its totality”* Dr. Sekagya said.

PROMETRA Uganda has a training school (PROMETRA's Forest School of Traditional Medicine) where more than 1500 healers have been trained on best practices of traditional medicine. The school offers up to three years of training and runs a traditional medicine clinic offering free traditional medical care to communities with HIV/AIDS and other related illnesses. In the first year, healers are taught medicinal plants and their characteristics. In second year, they are taught different diseases, signs and symptoms. In the third year, healers specialize in areas of bone setting, herbalism, spirituality and traditional birth care.

The centre has over 60 acres of a virgin forest with a botanical garden of 20 medicinal plants to be distributed to traditional healers. Currently, a factory to process and add value to herbs is being constructed at an estimated cost of over 100,000 dollars.

Background to the study

HIV remains a serious threat in East Africa. In Uganda about one million people are infected with HIV. The virus leads to a condition known as AIDS. Despite various efforts to combat the disease the country is overwhelmed by the number of HIV/AIDS patients with only 50% of the infected accessing Anti Retro Virus (ARVs), drugs. Other challenges to HIV therapies include high cost, development of resistance, poor dosage compliance, potential toxicity and carcinogenicity. Because of these challenges the four East African universities have joined the struggle to develop new therapies to combat the scourge by focusing on plants as sources of new HIV/AIDS drugs.

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