

Preparing for the Next Outbreak: Why Strong Clinical Trial Capacity in West Africa Matters

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In a world where infectious diseases spread quickly across borders, West Africa stands at the intersection of vulnerability and potential. It's a region that has faced devastating outbreaks, from the well-documented Ebola crisis in 2014 to ongoing threats like Lassa fever. The need for robust health infrastructures has never been clearer, and at the heart of this lies a critical yet often overlooked aspect: the capacity to conduct clinical research and Good Clinical Practice-compliant clinical trials. Across the region, a new initiative is rising to meet this challenge.

“Good Clinical Practice” is an international standard that ensures clinical trials are ethical, protect participants, and produce reliable results. The significance of Good Clinical Practice-compliant trial sites goes beyond simply conducting clinical research; it's about laying the foundation for a sustainable future where West Africa can stand at the forefront of epidemic preparedness. In the past, the region has struggled with limited clinical trial infrastructure, which has hindered timely vaccine development and the ability to quickly respond to emerging outbreaks.

But the story doesn't end in the past. The promise of a better clinical trial infrastructure in West Africa goes hand in hand with a future where countries can manage their health challenges more effectively and equitably. To effectively tackle health crises, West Africa needs Good Clinical Practice-compliant clinical trial sites. These sites are an essential piece of the puzzle that the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) is working to address through its 100 Days Mission, which aims to compress vaccine development timelines – ensuring new vaccines can be ready within 100 days of detecting a pandemic threat.

As part of the Advancing Research Capacity in West Africa (ARC-WA) project, co-led by the International Vaccine Institute and MRC Unit The Gambia at LSHTM, trial infrastructures are being strengthened across high-risk countries. This allows important clinical trials to proceed, where they might not have done in the past, and also ensures that when the next outbreak hits, West Africa will not only be ready to conduct safe and transparent trials but will also have the self-sustaining network it needs to protect its communities.

A collaborative visit between international partners and local healthcare staff at a medical facility in Abakaliki, Nigeria in January 2025

The future of epidemic preparedness in West Africa is not just about responding to crises as they come, but about building a framework that stands strong before the next pathogen emerges. In this framework, GCP-compliant trial sites are the bedrock—ensuring that the trials conducted will be ethical, efficient, and scientifically rigorous. This groundwork promises not just a reactive approach, but a proactive one—where West Africa's health system is resilient, self-sustaining, and ready for whatever the future holds.

The strength of Good Clinical Practice-compliant trial sites lies in their ability to act as a catalyst for broader health transformation across the region. They empower countries to conduct research on disease epidemiology, burden, vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics, laying the groundwork for a future that isn't just about surviving pandemics—but about thriving in a world that's always one step ahead. With initiatives like ARC-WA, West Africa is moving closer to that future, one trial site at a time.