

Putting Preparedness into Practice: A Vaccine Clinical Trial Dry Run in Kenema

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ARC-WA's clinical trial capacity building activity is part of a broader strategy funded by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and implemented by the Technical Coordinating Partner (TCP) – a collaboration between the International Vaccine Institute (IVI) and the Medical Research Council Unit The Gambia at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (MRCG). The mission is to establish a robust network of clinical trial sites in West Africa, capable of responding rapidly in the face of emerging health crises.

Kenema Government Hospital (KGH) is one of six selected sites across West Africa which include sites in Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. These sites are undergoing targeted capacity-building covering multiple technical areas, including infrastructure, clinical operations, laboratory systems, regulatory compliance, data management and community engagement.

In a significant stride towards West Africa's preparedness for epidemic threats, Kenema Government Hospital Viral Hemorrhagic Fever (KGH-VHF) in Sierra Leone is conducting a comprehensive dry run – a simulated clinical trial exercise. Under the ongoing Phase 2b site capacity-strengthening plan of the Advancing Research Capacity in West Africa (ARC-WA) project,

this exercise marks a pivotal step in ensuring the site's readiness to host future vaccine clinical trials in compliance with Good Clinical Practice (GCP) standards.

Inside the Dry Run: Simulating the Real Process

The dry run at KGH involves a detailed, end-to-end simulation of trial operations – replicating every step of the participant journey and internal team processes:

Community Engagement

The exercise begins with simulated community engagement processes – generating a list of potential participants, planning visit schedules, and initiating contact through the Community Engagement (CE) team.

On-site Screening and Consent

Participants undergo screening visits, including re-engagement, registration, and informed consent procedures. Counselling sessions are conducted to mimic real-world consent process, ensuring ethical and regulatory standards are met.

Clinical Procedures

Simulated medical history reviews, physical examinations, and sample collection follow. Mock vaccinations are administered, with all critical safety checks performed – from vital observation checks and pregnancy testing to investigational product (IP) preparation and post-vaccine observation.

Follow-Up Protocols

The exercise continues to follow-up procedures, capturing interim medical histories, monitoring adverse events (AEs), and collecting additional samples.

Team Reflection and Debrief

After each iteration, the site team conducts a full debriefing session to identify successes, bottlenecks, and areas for improvement.

Why Dry Runs Matter

The dry run isn't just a procedural rehearsal – it serves as a real-world test of readiness. It evaluates how well the clinical trial site can manage a live trial which encompasses: team coordination, adherence to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), handling biological samples, documenting the process including informed consent, managing participant data, and responding to unforeseen situations.

Dry runs play a critical role in stress-testing newly strengthened systems. It seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical training and execution, allowing teams to adapt logistical, technical, and ethical practices before the stakes become real.

Building Toward CEPI's 100-Day Mission

KGH's efforts align with CEPI's broader 100-Day Mission – a goal to develop and deploy vaccines within 100 days of a pathogen of pandemic-potential being discovered.

The dry run demonstrates more than just readiness – it highlights the commitment and coordination required to respond rapidly in line with international standards. The collaboration between national experts, international partners, and empowered communities exemplifies the collective strength needed to confront global health emergencies.

As the ARC-WA project continues to expand across the region, the lessons learned in KGH- VHF inform preparedness efforts well beyond Sierra Leone – fortifying the sub-regions' readiness, one site at a time.