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Issued by Stellenbosch University
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Top Genomics Labs partner with UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office to strengthen surveillance of respiratory diseases in SA and UK

- *The project will officially launch on February 6, 2025 with a signing event involving the UK High Commissioner of South Africa and the Director of the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) at Stellenbosch University medical campus in Tygerberg, Cape Town.*
- *At the event representatives from CERI, the Wellcome Sanger Institute, key stakeholders, and UK and SA government leaders will outline their vision for transforming disease surveillance and collaborate on global health, security and science.*

Cape Town, South Africa – 5 February 2025

A North-South partnership between the Genomic Surveillance Unit (GSU) at the Wellcome Sanger Institute and the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) at Stellenbosch University (SU), has received approximately 8.7 million South African Rands in funding under the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's (FCDO) UK-SA Health System Strengthening Partnership.

This project will leverage genomic surveillance to monitor respiratory viruses, like Influenza, Metapneumovirus, Respiratory syncytial virus and COVID-19 in real-time to boost pandemic preparedness in both the United Kingdom and South Africa.

This initiative underscores the vital role of data sharing and international collaboration to create a unified, robust surveillance system for faster, more coordinated responses to emerging global health threats. The project will advance seasonal disease preparedness and build local capacity to address global health challenges.

"This partnership is about building bridges between the northern and southern hemispheres to ensure that both regions are better prepared for future health challenges," said Professor Tulio de Oliveira, Director of CERI and the lead of the team that discovered SARS-CoV-2 Beta and Omicron variants. "In the age of nationalism and global division, our collaboration with the Wellcome Sanger Institute and the UK FDCO will not only improve global genomic surveillance capabilities but also create a framework for knowledge exchange, biosecurity and capacity building."

The project will focus on genomic monitoring of respiratory viruses; key culprits behind seasonal infections and potential pandemics. By harnessing advanced genomic techniques, researchers aim to track emerging variants, identify drug and vaccine resistance strains, and provide actionable insights to public health authorities and the development of medical countermeasures.

John Sillitoe, Director of the Genomic Surveillance Unit at the Wellcome Sanger Institute, emphasised the global impact of this endeavour: "Our joint efforts with CERI will enable the development of a robust, integrated surveillance system that will inform public health responses across continents. By combining expertise and infrastructure, we can accelerate the fight against infectious diseases and build capacity to improve global health."

The start of the programme was preceded by a visit of Lord Collins of Highbury, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the FDCO, and Deputy Leader of the House of Lords in the UK, to CERI on 4 November 2024. During his visit to CERI last year, UK Minister for Africa Lord Collins of Highbury commented: "South Africa is taking a leading role in science and research across the continent, and the UK is proud to be supporting this. Together we are collaborating on global health, security and science for a stronger, more resilient future." (link)

In addition to the research milestones, this initiative sets a precedent for fostering equitable global partnerships in health innovation. It builds on previous investments by the South African and UK governments, the Rockefeller Foundation, the World Bank and the Wellcome Trust, and other stakeholders, maximising existing infrastructure and human capital to ensure impactful outcomes.

Antony Phillipson, High Commissioner to South Africa stated "Investing in global health is in all our interests and strengthening our cooperation in disease surveillance is key if we are to be better prepared for pandemics and work together on shared global health challenges. I'm excited to see this boost to our bilateral partnership; it is a key part of our programme to support South Africa in health systems strengthening."

"This partnership is a testament to the power of global collaboration in advancing public health. By combining world-class expertise from South Africa and the UK, we are not only strengthening genomic surveillance but also fostering innovation that will enhance pandemic preparedness worldwide. Stellenbosch University is proud to be at the forefront of this crucial work, ensuring that science serves society by enabling faster, more effective responses to emerging health threats." said Prof Wim de Villiers, SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor.

Key goals of the project include:

- Establishing a shared, multi-pathogen genomic surveillance system for respiratory viruses.
- Facilitating data and knowledge exchange between the UK and South Africa research institutes and national public health laboratories in SA (NICD) and UK (UK Health Security Agency) to inform seasonal disease preparedness.
- Training research fellows to optimise genomic methodologies and build local capacity for epidemic and pandemic response.

The project also positions South Africa as a leader in genomic surveillance and pandemic preparedness, emphasising the critical role of global data sharing to enhance public health responses. By fostering collaboration between experts in the UK and South Africa, the initiative aims to establish an interconnected system that enables real-time detection, analysis, and action against emerging health threats.

The launch event will showcase the groundbreaking collaboration and a shared vision for expanding the project to other regions. Together, the partners aim to build a stronger, more resilient global health system where shared knowledge drives better responses to pandemics and other health challenges.

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About CERI:

The Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) is a globally recognised institute based at Stellenbosch University, dedicated to improving epidemic responses through cutting-edge research and innovation. CERI is a specialised genomics facility of the WHO AFRO and the Africa CDC and a training hub for Africa. CERI is based at Stellenbosch University within the School for Data Science and Computational Thinking and works across Faculties of Health and Medical

Science and Faculty of Science and other SU entities contributing to research and innovation in South Africa. Connect with us at www.ceri.org.za and on X: @ceri_news and LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/ceri-su/

About the Wellcome Sanger Institute Genomic Surveillance Unit (GSU):
The Genomic Surveillance Unit at the Wellcome Sanger Institute is a leading facility in Cambridgeshire, UK, focused on using genomics to tackle global health challenges, including malaria, COVID-19, and other respiratory viruses.

The GSU/CERI Partnership – was established in early 2024 to bring together the Genomic surveillance laboratories in the UK and South Africa that were both renowned for their work identifying new variants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partnership details: www.sanger.ac.uk/collaboration/strategic-partnership-genomic-surveillance-unit-gsu-and-centre-for-epidemic-response-and-innovation-ceri/

About the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's (FCDO):

The UK is a longstanding advocate for, and investor in, global health. Investing in health systems remains a key priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and other government departments (OGDs) working on global health. A health systems strengthening (HSS) approach not only ensures countries have the capability to prepare for, prevent, detect, and respond to epidemic and pandemic disease outbreaks and health threats like antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and the health impacts of climate change, but also deliver UHC and improve health outcomes for all.

"Collaborating & exchanging ideas across international borders drives scientific advancement & accelerates research." Dr. Lucy Chappell, Chief Scientific Adviser

During the recent bilateral forum, South Africa and the UK committed to continuing to work closely on global health security, including World Health Organisation (WHO) reform to ensure pandemic preparedness and response capacity across the globe, including through the Global Pathogen Surveillance Network, supporting local vaccine manufacturing, clinical trials and the importance of implementing the Lusaka Agenda, reforming multilateral health initiatives to better serve developing country priorities.

PHOTOS

- Photos of the visit of Lord Collins of Highbury, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the FDCO, and Deputy Leader of the House of Lords in the UK to CERI at Stellenbosch University in November 2024 to discuss the partnership and launch. The photos also include Prof Tulio de Oliveira, director of CERI, Stellenbosch University. Credit: CERI Media
- Photos of the launch will be available from the 7th of February. ceri@sun.ac.za