

The Guardian

Africa's Covid-19 research must be tailored to its realities - by its own scientists

Monique Wasunna

Trust is essential in the pandemic and scientists here can set the priorities that make the most sense for our people

Coronavirus - latest global updates
See all our coronavirus coverage

Global development is supported by

BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION About this content

Sat 25 Apr 2020 04.00 EDT



Your privacy

We and our partners use your information - collected through cookies and similar technologies - to improve your experience on our site, analyse how you use it and show you personalised advertising.

You can find out more in our [privacy policy](#) and [cookie policy](#), and manage your consent at any time by going to '[Privacy settings](#)' at the bottom of any page.

Information that may be used
Purposes

I'm OK with that **Options**

Although Africa has yet to feel the full force of the coronavirus, preventing severe cases is a higher priority than it is elsewhere. Africa needs research that is tailored to our reality.

Even hospitals in New York are overwhelmed; hospitals in many African countries barely have enough ventilators to fill one room. So research needs to be directed towards preventing hospitalisations, potentially through treatment of mild cases as early as possible.

If research is not conducted in Africa, potential life-saving innovations will be delayed, not least because regulatory authorities in Africa will require local data on Covid-19 patients to register any new drug.

Local researchers are also more likely to maintain the trust of the population. Outrageous comments made recently by two French researchers about using Africa as a testing ground for vaccines have sparked fury throughout the continent. The indignation is understandable: just because there is a health crisis does not mean research ethics can be violated.

Such careless talk threatens to undermine years of work by African scientists to gain trust among people.

I am an infectious diseases researcher in Nairobi and a medical doctor. I have dedicated my career to developing better treatments for kala-azar, the “black fever”, a deadly parasitic illness that affects the most vulnerable people across eastern Africa. Too many patients – especially children – die because of the lack of effective tests and treatments for this disease.

I see doctors on the news in New York and Milan telling their harrowing experiences of battling for patients with Covid-19 in the absence of a cure. As it knocks on our doors, I see their helplessness as a mirror of my own: when the treatment you need to save a life simply does not exist.

I believe that our response to Covid-19 can be informed by our experience with kala-azar research.

To find an effective treatment, I have travelled to the remotest areas of Kenya to sit with local leaders and gain their trust – explaining why clinical trials are vital to their communities. They have welcomed us as African researchers. As the Covid-19 threat looms, I feel this goodwill is at risk.

In 2003, scientists, doctors and ministries of health from Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia and, eventually,

Your privacy

We and our partners use your information – collected through cookies and similar technologies – to improve your experience on our site, analyse how you use it and show you personalised advertising.

You can find out more in our privacy policy and cookie policy, and manage your consent at any time by going to ‘Privacy settings’ at the bottom of any page.

Information that may be used
Purposes

I'm OK with that Options

bringing together governments and research institutions to accelerate research in low- and middle-income countries.

With kala-azar research, African countries showed that we could run high-quality clinical trials by working together, along with our international partners. This was research for Africans, by Africans. There are other examples: the Democratic Republic of the Congo led research, along with neighbouring countries, for the first all-oral treatment for sleeping sickness. Against all odds, Congolese researchers brought world-class clinical research to the most remote areas of the country.

African-led clinical research can help us continue to build trust and confidence within our communities by showing them that our scientists are setting the priorities that make the most sense for our people.

We must continue to work together and take control of our own research agenda. This is the best way to support our fellow African doctors, who have been on the frontline of so many disease outbreaks in the past and will be again very soon.

• Dr Monique Wasunna is director of the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative's Africa regional office

America faces an epic choice ...

... in the coming year, and the results will define the country for a generation. These are perilous times. Over the last three years, much of what the Guardian holds dear has been threatened – democracy, civility, truth. This administration has cleared out science and scientists across all departments. America's reputation as a competent global leader is in peril. Truth is being chased away. But with your help we can continue to put it center stage.

Rampant disinformation, partisan news sources and social media's tsunami of fake news are no bases on which to inform the American public in 2020. We believe every one of us deserves equal access to fact-based news and analysis. So we've decided to keep Guardian journalism free for all readers, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. This would not be possible without the generosity of readers, who now support our work from across America in all 50 states.

You've read more than 6 articles in the last six months. Our journalism relies on our readers' generosity – your financial support has meant we can keep investigating, disentangling and

Your privacy

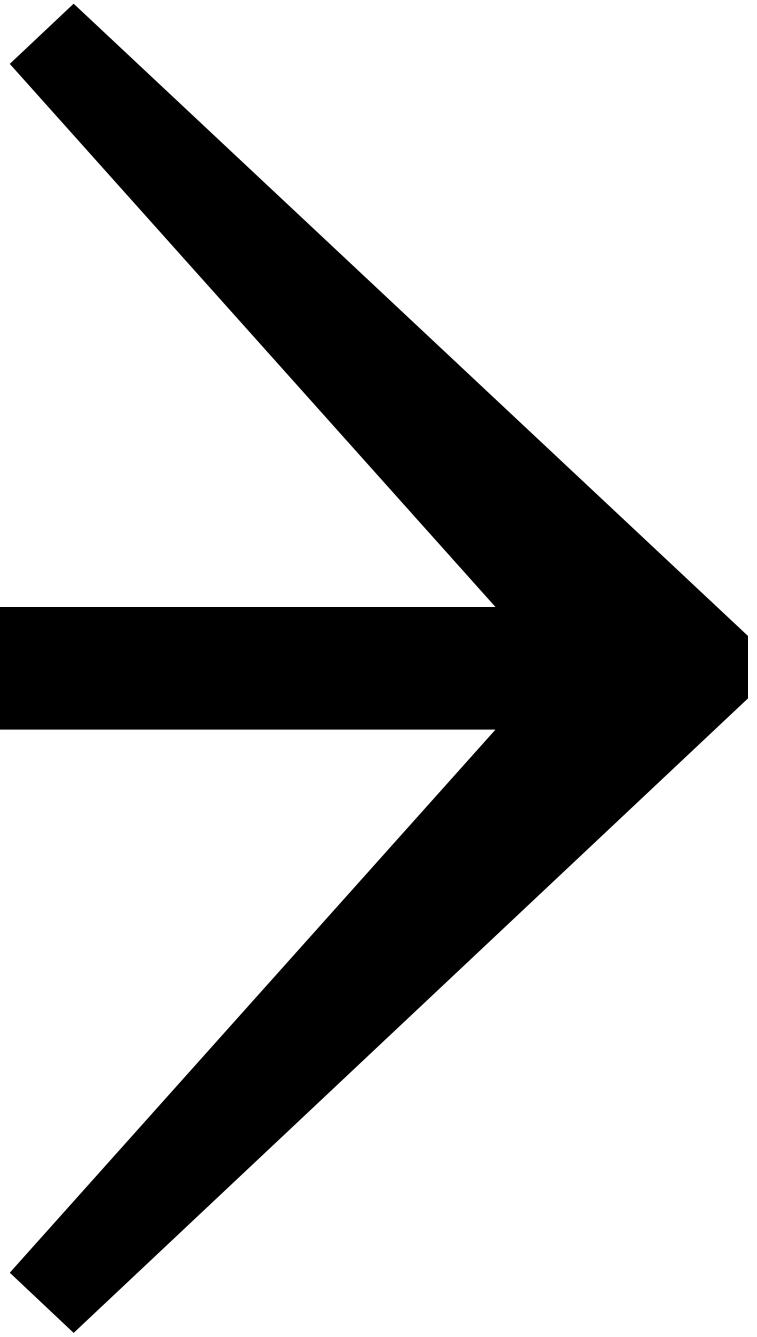
We and our partners use your information – collected through cookies and similar technologies – to improve your experience on our site, analyse how you use it and show you personalised advertising.

You can find out more in our privacy policy and cookie policy, and manage your consent at any time by going to 'Privacy settings' at the bottom of any page.

Information that may be used
Purposes

I'm OK with that Options

Support the Guardian



Your privacy

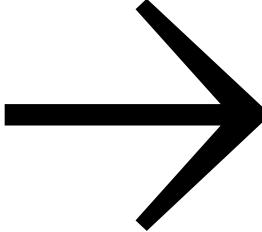
We and our partners use your information - collected through cookies and similar technologies - to improve your experience on our site, analyse how you use it and show you personalised advertising.

You can find out more in our [privacy policy](#) and [cookie policy](#), and manage your consent at any time by going to '[Privacy settings](#)' at the bottom of any page.

Information that may be used
Purposes

I'm OK with thatOptions

Set my reminder



We will use this to send you a single email in July 2020. To find out what personal data we collect and how we use it, please visit our Privacy Policy

We will be in touch to invite you to contribute. Look out for a message in your inbox in July 2020. If you have any questions about contributing, please contact us here.

Topics

- Global health
- Coronavirus outbreak
- Africa
- Infectious diseases
- Medical research
- Microbiology
- comment

Your privacy

We and our partners use your information - collected through cookies and similar technologies - to improve your experience on our site, analyse how you use it and show you personalised advertising.

You can find out more in our privacy policy and cookie policy, and manage your consent at any time by going to 'Privacy settings' at the bottom of any page.

Information that may be used

Purposes

I'm OK with that Options