

Vaccine for diarrhoea to be developed

Oct 20, 2002

Hyderabad, Oct. 19: In a major international push to fight rotavirus causing diarrhoea, which is responsible for the death of over one lakh children every year in India, Bharat Biotech here has kick-started vaccine development efforts with financial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Children's Vaccine Programme of the Programme for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) based in Seattle.

The first efforts at Bharat Biotech will involve preparing pilot lots of vaccine for clinical trials, which will take place at Delhi over the next two to four years under the guidance of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). When developed, it will be the first rotavirus vaccine in India. James E Maynard, Senior Vice President, PATH, told press persons that Bharat Biotech would get apart of the \$6 million support allotted by PATH for the vaccine development programme. Since this investment comes entirely from the public sector, the emphasis was not one recovering the money but on easy availability of vaccine at the lowest possible price for public sector use.

The first meeting of the international collaboration on developing rotavirus vaccine was held from October 16 to 19. The group included experts from India and the United States who have Collaborated in research on the rotavirus for over a decade, under the auspices of the Indo-US Vaccine Action Programme. The investigators, M. K. Bhan of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, Durga Rao of Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, Harry Greenberg of Stanford University and Roger Glass of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, had identified rotavirus strains from Indian newborns with characteristics suggesting that these strains could make good candidates for vaccines. The break throughs were promising but the group needed a commercial partner to prepare strains as vaccines to prevent rotavirus diarrhoea in children. Krishna Ella, Director of Bharat Biotech said the project represented a new approach to vaccine development wherein vaccine strains found in India will be prepared by a local biotech company and tested in clinical trials in India.

The project has been supported for years by the Indian Department of Biotechnology and the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) but received a major impetus from the vaccine programme of PATH.