

Novel partnership to generate much needed evidence of impact in new Access to Medicine program

New industry–academic initiative aims to independently evaluate Novartis Access project.

Improving health globally is a complex problem with many players. When it comes to the rising incidences of chronic, non-communicable diseases like asthma, diabetes, and hypertension, pharmaceutical companies are important members of the team. That's because effective treatment and management of these conditions depends on access to medicines. The International Human Rights Commission has called on pharmaceutical companies to fulfill their human rights obligations and make medicines more accessible globally. The industry has responded: more than 100 Access to Medicine (ATM) programs have been launched in the past few years. But there's a catch. Very few of these programs have been assessed to see if they are actually having an impact on people's health, protecting against poverty, enhancing equity and being sustainable.

An innovative new venture between academics and industry is aiming to change this, and create a new partnership model for the global health community.

Novartis recently launched [Novartis Access](#), an ATM program, in Kenya. And the company has called on global health experts at Boston University (BU) to conduct an independent evaluation before the program is rolled out to 30 more countries. The BU evaluation team recently held a public information session in Vancouver, BC, to talk about this new approach.

Co-investigator Veronika Wirtz, Associate Professor at Boston University's School of Public Health, says her team was keen to take on this project in order to contribute to robust methods to evaluate current ATM models. "We have just done a review of the 120 Access to Medicine (ATM) initiatives underway. Only seven of them have published any evidence or evaluation of their impact. And of those seven, the quality of evidence of the impact of these ATM initiatives was very low. The pharmaceutical industry must do more when it comes to evidence." Wirtz says there are many reasons companies are not doing rigorous evaluations of their programs. Good evaluations cost money, take time and risk publicising a flawed approach. Novartis is taking the risk, and willing to absorb the cost of a proper evaluation.

"This is not only an industry responsibility," says Wirtz. "The global health community must get on board and support evaluations. The rates of NCDs are growing and we have to make meaningful progress." Wirtz and her colleagues hope their evaluation of *Novartis Access* will provide a useful template for other public-private partnerships. Co-investigator Peter Rockers, Assistant Professor at Boston University School of Public Health, says the team is willing to share all of its methodology and findings. "We are going above and beyond to show transparency. We have negotiated our clear independence as evaluators. We own all the data and we are making it all publicly available on the [BU School of Public Health](#) website."

Rockers has recently been on the ground in Kenya, setting up the evaluation with local partners [Innovations for Poverty Action](#). To date the team has completed a baseline study and is in the process of analyzing those results.

The *Novartis Access* program targets four common non-communicable diseases (NCDs): cancer—typically breast cancer; cardiovascular problems—like hypertension; respiratory conditions—like asthma; and diabetes. The program will provide 15 common medications for those conditions at a cost of about \$1.00 US per month per person treated. It's a challenge to make it work, especially in countries with remote villages and an array of different health providers. Getting evaluated from the outset will help Novartis correct mistakes and improve accessibility going forward.

Methodology

The BU evaluation team has chosen 8 different counties in Kenya and then randomized half of them as controls and half as recipients. The evaluation will focus on two key impacts of the Novartis access initiative: availability and affordability. The team will inventory all medicines in clinics and hospitals and then monitor availability and affordability of these medicines in selected households. Rockers says the study will also collect information on household expenditures, on medication and on other important goods including food and education, to understand program impacts on a broader range of welfare measures. The team will conduct qualitative interviews with selected households to elicit patient perspectives on how they access medications, what the barriers are for them, and how having a chronic condition affects their family spending.

Rockers says this kind of independent evaluation is overdue. “As a global health community we know very little at this point about how to improve access to medicines. It's not just about industry responsibility; it's about pushing the field forward. We need to do things differently. We need to do more to work with companies to innovate and develop better strategies and the only way we can really know what strategies should be pursued is to do these kinds of studies.”

Rockers says the team will also look at so-called unforeseen consequences of the *Novartis Access* program. Will lower-cost medicines in the public sector affect prices in the private sector? Will medications be diverted and sold privately? And will people be more likely to seek medical care if they know the treatment will now be more affordable?

Sustainability

Wirtz says the hallmark of the program's success will be sustainable and continued access to affordable medicine over the long-term, not just transitory price relief. Harald Nusser, global head of *Novartis Access* says this is his goal too. Nusser says *Novartis Access* will be a commercial for-profit venture to ensure that it works. “The old models of charity and donations have not worked well because they are not scalable and they depend on the whims of however is in charge of a company. They also risk crowding out local players. If you take your consumer seriously, if there is a certain price tag or value to the medicines, they take the medication seriously.” Nusser says *Novartis Access* is open to exploring local partnerships from manufacturing to clinical research as a further way to make the program endure.

The BU evaluation of *Novartis Access* will continue for the next two years.

