

SPEAK India April Meetings Summary

The second SPEAK India general assembly meeting was held in Varanasi on April 24th and 25th, 2017. Over 30 national and international delegates attended to present and critique the research proposals that have been developed in the interim since the first general assembly meeting, held in Delhi in November 2016.

Five research proposals that addressed key research questions identified during the November meeting were presented between the three workpackages, surveillance, transmission and health systems:

1. 'Innovative approaches to improve epidemiological surveillance of VL and PKDL and accelerate elimination' (surveillance)
2. 'A proof-of-concept study to evaluate the potential of xenomonitoring as a surveillance tool in a post-elimination setting' (transmission)
3. 'Planning for success: a pilot to operationalise focal reactive spraying for VL in India' (transmission)
4. 'Strengthening the health system response to VL in the post-elimination phase' (health systems)
5. 'Modelling visceral leishmaniasis: elimination and beyond' (cross-cutting)

The three workpackage leaders, Dr Shyam Sundar, Dr Pradeep Das, Dr Narayan Devadasan, presented each proposal related to their designated field during the morning of April 24th. As the fifth proposal had been designed to intersect all workpackages, it was presented by Prof Graham Medley. The afternoon was devoted to group work, with both workpackage-specific and cross-disciplinary workshops taking place. During these sessions, consortium members were invited to critique the proposals, focusing principally on considering potential barriers to effective operational implementation, and identifying areas of synergy. Principle decisions from these discussions included:

- Research should take place in Jharkhand where possible
- Fieldwork for the surveillance and transmission proposals should be carried out in the same place, at the same time, to provide data on people, vectors and parasites for modelling projects

A working lunch was also hosted for the Steering Committee on April 24th. The need for a support group to drive the proposal grant writing process was discussed, and key individuals identified for each workpackage:

- Surveillance: Dr Shyam Sundar (leader), Prof Marleen Boellaert, Dr Epko Hasker, Ms Kristien Cloots
- Transmission: Dr Pradeep Das (leader), Prof Mary Cameron, Ms Shannon McIntyre
- Health Systems: Dr Narayan Devadasan (leader), Dr Vijayshree Yellappa

On the 25th, workpackage leaders presented their updated proposals, and again invited comments from all consortium members on how they should be edited to reflect operational constraints and realities. Following the presentations, workpackage leaders and their deputies were required to produce a five-slide summary and concept note detailing the aims, objectives, activities, deliverables, timeline and partners of their proposal.

The Leadership Group convened on April 26th to review the concept notes and summary presentations. Representatives from organisations engaged in VL control in India, including the NVBDCP, PATH and KalaCORE, were also invited to offer their opinions. During these discussions, it was determined the focal IRS proposal could not be carried out in its current form due to ongoing plans for blanket IRS in response to case history in endemic areas. Additional partners were also suggested to the surveillance and health systems proposals, and prior relevant research brought to attention.

During the Leadership Group meeting, the feasibility of achieving the 2017 elimination goal was also discussed. It was agreed that research and operational efforts will need to be sustained beyond VL elimination as a public health problem to ensure transmission is broken, and similar problems to those encountered in polio control are avoided. To maintain interest in VL and address this need, a presentation on VL history, current status, the need to sustain momentum following elimination, and the options moving forward will be compiled for the ICMR and BMGF.

The proposals presented during the SPEAK India general assembly meeting will be a component of the plan to maintain control efforts and break VL transmission in the future. It has been agreed that the surveillance, health systems, modelling and transmission (xenomonitoring only) research proposals will be submitted to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, after addressing the issues identified on April 24th and 25th. Due to limitations in the availability of appropriate study sites, only a pared down version of the original focal IRS proposal will be submitted.

The task force assembled by the Steering Committee will now move forward with the grant submission process. All proposals are to be submitted to the BMGF for approval on May 31st, and to the ICMR on August 8th for consideration on September 8th. To meet these deadlines, task force members will convene on a weekly basis to collaboratively complete the submission forms, produce detailed plans of project activities, budgets, and timelines.