



SHAPe: South African/HVTN AIDS Vaccine Early Stage Investigator Programme Request for Letter of Intent/Applications

Supported by: the HIV Vaccine Trials Network (HVTN) and the Desmond Tutu HIV Centre (DTHC) with funding from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Important dates:

Release/Posted Date: December 11, 2009
Letters of Intent/Application Due: January 20, 2010
Review Date: February 9, 2010
Notification of LOI Acceptance: Feb 12, 2010
Research Proposal Due: March 26, 2010
Review Date: April 19, 2010
Anticipated start date: June 1, 2010

Program Overview

This exciting new initiative aims to expand and strengthen the contribution of South African investigators to HIV vaccine research through a structured research, mentorship and PhD programme. SHAPe aims to build scientific research capacity by helping to develop and foster the careers of early stage investigators interested in clinical trials, laboratory and epidemiological research that support preventative HIV vaccine development.

The SHAPe Programme will establish a cohort of young scientists who will conduct research at established HIV vaccine research units in South Africa. Research projects will address critical priorities of the HVTN scientific agenda and further South Africa's meaningful scientific, academic and practical contribution to HIV vaccine development. Ongoing support for scholars will be available in the form of training, mentoring and technical assistance.

Funds Available and Anticipated Number of Awards

36 months of full-time funding including salary (commensurate with experience), research-related costs and participation in career development/mentoring activities is available to support 4 investigators. Support may also be available to cover Ph.D. programme fees. Ongoing funding is contingent on satisfactory progress and funding availability.

Eligibility

Eligible applicants will be South Africans who have received an MBChB degree in the past 10 years and have completed their community service. Applicants must be able to commit to 100% of full-time professional effort conducting the proposed research project and engaging in

mentorship and structured learning activities as part of the SHAPe Programme. Applicants should have a commitment to maintaining a long-term career in HIV research in South Africa. SHAPe supports transformation in science.

Research Locations

Investigators will conduct research in one or more of the following HIV vaccine trial sites/labs: Desmond Tutu HIV Centre in Cape Town, Perinatal HIV Research Unit in Johannesburg, and Aurum Research in Klerksdorp

Programme description

Background

South Africa remains an important country in which to conduct HIV vaccine studies. Recent studies have shown that prevention efficacy studies are both feasible and likely to succeed. In addition, the heterogeneity of the epidemic in this country makes it possible to consider a range of clinical studies at various phases and in a variety of populations.

There are currently three established HVTN vaccine sites in South Africa. Throughout the country, there are 7 South African AIDS Vaccine Initiative (SAAVI) sites and a number of prevention sites where a great deal of expertise has developed at senior level. There is concern however, that the 'next level' of more junior clinician scientists is not being developed. This is due to a number of reasons, some of which are historical and unique to South Africa. The medical curriculum and career path in South Africa is well designed to develop practitioners who are highly competent clinicians but are often underexposed to research and research methodology. Research exposure requires a practitioner to leave a clearly established clinical path with incumbent financial risk and little academic support. There is very little opportunity currently for mixing of clinical and research careers. For example, South Africa does not have a MD, PhD program and vanishingly few South African clinicians have higher scientific degrees. In addition, since the career path is not supported academically nor financially, very few newly qualified clinicians consider research as a long term career option. Clinical trial sites with their incumbent resources and infrastructure provide an ideal setting and a favourable environment for the development of research career pathways.

As the vaccine field moves into a new era, a sound understanding of the immunobiology and the interface between HIV pathogenesis and the human vaccine response, the role of preclinical studies and the application into sound trial design will be critical for efficient and sustainable progress of the field. A plan to further develop expertise in the areas of trial design, epidemiology, vaccinology and basic sciences, together with a series of key research protocols in funded sites will benefit both the medium and longer term plans of the global HIV vaccine research field.

Research Objectives

The intent of this RFA is to identify, support and retain young clinicians interested in committing to a career in HIV research. Early career Investigators, by working closely with established South African HIV vaccine researchers to identify priority research topics/questions, will design and propose a novel research project to conduct within the framework and support of an HIV vaccine research unit. This mechanism will allow investigators to develop new collaborations or build upon existing collaborations and prior research efforts to address any of a number of research questions in areas including but not limited to epidemiology, immunology and other topics related to HIV vaccinology.

SHAPe Programme Application Process

Identification of SHAPe ESI scholars will occur through a two part selection process. The first part involves the submission of a Letter of Intent/Application (addressed in this RFA). Promising applicants will be invited to work with one or more of the Principal Investigators of the HIV vaccine trial sites to identify a priority research topic that fits their individual interests. The second part of the application process requires the applicant to develop a detailed research proposal. Applicants who submit successful research proposals will be eligible for a SHAPe ESI Scholar award.

To apply

Please submit the SHAPe Letter of Intent/Application form, a biographical sketch and two letters of reference by **5:00PM local time on 20 January 2010**. Letters of Reference should be written by your current employer and another referee of your choice. An acknowledgment of receipt will be sent to each applicant. Please do not include appendices with applications. For more information please contact Kristen Terblanche (contact information below) or visit www.dthf.org.za

Review and Selection Process for Letter of Intent/Application

All LOI applications will undergo a selection process in which a committee will review each application, discuss and assign a priority score. Applications that are complete and responsive to this RFA will be evaluated for:

- Fit between the applicant's research interests and SHAPe/HVTN priorities
- Relevance of the applicant's experience and training to conducting research as part of the SHAPe Programme.
- Relevance of the applicant's career plans to program goals

Letter of Intent Acceptance Notice

Once the review of the LOI application is completed, applicants will be notified of the status of their application by the Programme Coordinator on or before February 12, 2010. Applications will either be accepted to move on to the next application phase – preparation of a full research proposal – or declined.

Contacts

visit www.dthf.org.za

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