

Researchers put new HIV vaccine to test

5 400 people taking part in groundbreaking SA study

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THE NATION'S hopes of having South Africa license the world's first HIV vaccines are resting on 15 research sites.

HVTN 702, the first HIV vaccine-efficacy study in seven years, is under way.

It was launched at Setshaba Research Centre in Tshwane yesterday, on the eve of World Aids Day today. Setshaba will make it one of the first places to administer the experimental vaccine.

South Africa has one of the largest burdens of HIV and Aids in the world. An estimated 7 million people are infected, there are about 1 000 new infections daily and more than 3 million are on antiretroviral treatment (ART). The study will establish whether the experimental regimen safely prevents HIV infection among South African adults.

The vaccine is a modified vaccine regimen used in a trial study reported in Thailand in 2009, called RV144. It had shown a modest efficacy of 31.2 percent in preventing new infections,

three-and-a-half years after the first vaccination.

In the HVTN702 study, the design, schedule and components of the RV144 vaccine have been modified in an attempt to increase the efficacy and duration of protection.

And at least one 21-year-old has raised her hand to be part of a momentous 36-month momentous journey that will see her being given five vaccine injections in a year and then routine check-ups.

"The reason why I'm joining is that there are so many people with HIV in this country and it's growing at a rapidly high rate," Jane said yesterday. Her identity is protected for ethical reasons.

"I wanted the vaccine to be known by my friends and family. I have a friend who has HIV and a family member who died from HIV-related complications. I want to see if the vaccine will help.

"I've had five weeks of counselling. My family and friends think it's a good thing and that it will help others."

If the study shows efficacy

and durability, said HVTN 702 protocol chairperson Professor Glenda Gray, researchers would approach the Medicines Control Council to enrol the vaccine and license it.

Jane is one of the 5 400 men and women, aged between 18 and 35, to take part in the study. Researchers will follow up with participants for 36 months in a double-blind, placebo-controlled experiment.

Co-principal investigator Dr Mookho Malahleha said: "The trial is the largest and most technologically advanced to take place in South Africa. I'm proud, as a South African and a researcher, to be part of it."

HIV Vaccine Trials Network principal investigator Dr Larry Corey said the most joyous part of his job was interacting with communities, who were the real heroes.

"Medical research is all about people – people who participate, people who build trials, investigators who think about what new things they can bring to communities and inventors of new technology."

