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Press release

## South Africa to launch HIV prevention project

A highly effective oral medication to prevent HIV will be provided to young women in South Africa at high risk of getting the virus, as part of a sexual and reproductive health access project launched today by the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Wits RHI) and Unitaid.

Working closely with the South African Department of Health, the US\$10.6 million project will deliver comprehensive services, including medication known as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to 6,640 adolescent girls and young women aged 15 to 24 in priority areas of South Africa.

PrEP is a one-pill-daily antiretroviral treatment that can reduce the risk of HIV infection by up to 70 percent.

While South Africa has the world's largest HIV treatment programme, it has not been as successful in preventing new infections.

Professor Helen Rees, Executive Director of Wits RHI said: "New HIV prevention technologies could make a major difference to the trajectory of the HIV epidemic. If we have new tools, even if they are partially effective, we must consider introducing them into the public sector if we want to stop new infections."

"This project will help to fill a gap in the global evidence base for how real-life PrEP delivery can be carried out in the context of comprehensive health services for adolescent girls and young women," said Dr Saiqa Mullick, Director of Implementation Science at Wits RHI, who will lead the project in close collaboration with the Department of Health.

In South Africa approximately 1,745 new HIV infections occur in young women in their early 20s every week, and they have a four-fold increased risk of contracting HIV compared with their male peers. One third of South African teenage girls become pregnant before the age of 20. Starting January 2018, the three-year project will be integrated into the National Department of Health's She Conquers campaign, which works with adolescent women and young girls to reduce HIV incidence, gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, school drop-out rates and youth unemployment, with a focus on prioritized districts.

The project will develop, implement and test various strategies to reach the adolescent girls and women who are at high risk of contracting HIV, create demand for and improve linkages to services; and support retention in care and adherence.

"Unitaid's longer-term objective is to lay the groundwork for wider adoption of PrEP in high-risk groups," said Lelio Marmora, Unitaid's Executive Director. "At scale, this project is expected to avert 3,000 HIV infections a year and save nearly US\$ 20 million, the difference between the cost of PrEP and that of adhering to HIV treatment for a lifetime."

Adolescent girls and young women are a priority, high-risk population, particularly in East and Southern Africa, but few programmes have been implemented for them on a large scale, and many questions remain about how to reach young women to initiate and sustain HIV prevention options.

#### About Wits RHI:

The Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Wits RHI) is a leading African research institute focusing on HIV, sexual and reproductive health and vaccine preventable diseases. It is the largest research institute of the University of the Witwatersrand and has contributed to health policies in South Africa. It is also a Medical Research Council-collaborating centre, a World Health Organization-collaborating centre, as well as a United Nations Population Fund strategic partner.

#### About Unitaid:

Unitaid is an international organization that invests in new ways to prevent, diagnose and treat HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, tuberculosis and malaria more quickly, more cheaply and more effectively. It accelerates access to innovation so critical health products reach people who most need them. Unitaid's work allows large-scale introduction of health products through funding by the Global Fund, the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and governments.

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