Community Advisory Boards, a way of building community trust to conduct Research: Experience from a Research study site in South Western Uganda

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Community Engagement (CE) is very critical for the successful conduct of any biomedical research. Having an active Community Advisory Board (CAB) is one of the ways we can meaningfully and sustainably engage stakeholders about research.

From 1994 to date, MRC/UVRI and LSHTM Uganda Research Unit, a research site located in Masaka City, South Western Uganda has successfully conducted several clinical trials. The site initially worked with informal community advisory structures until 2004 when the first CAB was established. It comprised 12 members nominated and seconded by a wide range of key stakeholders (religious denominations, media, health workers, civic and local leaders and lay community members). Currently, it has 16 members derived from the above described constituencies with additional representation from former research participants and the youth.

Prior to start of any study, the protocol is reviewed by the CAB and their feedback integrated prior to submission of the document to the ethics committee and regulatory bodies for review. The CAB provides insightful advice on all aspects of the trial including Informed Consent Documents, CE Plan(s), Recruitment and Retention strategies, messaging as well as language appropriateness. During study conduct, they are given regular updates and have an opportunity to input. They collect and collate community concerns in a two-way manner for synergy between host communities and research team(s).

With CAB support, the site has strengthened community-research team partnerships, improved research and cultural competences for the communities and research teams respectively.

The Site has so far successfully conducted 3 HIV, 2 Ebola and 1 COVID Vaccine trials, 2 microbicide clinical trials, multiple behavioural studies, and studies on Non communicable diseases with 4 clinical trials currently ongoing. There haven’t been any major community concerns courtesy of the invaluable support from the CAB during the COVID pandemic.

They have picked up and helped with demystification of community rumours and misconceptions regarding bio-medical research.

With improved research literacy capacity, the site CAB have immensely contributed to the strengthening of the national Cross-CAB Network, fostering cross research institution learning on best CE practices and more community acceptability of biomedical research conduct.