

In the news

MALARIA VACCINE SAFE FOR BABIES

A recent trial in Mozambique has proved that the malaria vaccine RTS,S is safe and protective in those most vulnerable to the disease — infants less than 1 year old. “These results further strengthen the vision that a vaccine that can partly protect young African children and infants might contribute to the reduction of the intolerable burden of disease and death caused by malaria”, conclude the researchers who carried out the trial (*The Lancet*, 17 October 2007).

The RTS,S vaccine, which is made by GlaxoSmithKline, has been in development and trials for about 20 years and has already proved to be effective against malaria in children aged 1–4 years. In the recent trial, 214 babies were given three shots of either the RTS,S vaccine or a control hepatitis B vaccine. Fewer cases of malaria were found in the experimental group (22 cases) compared with the control group (46 cases), and babies who did get malaria after vaccination with RTS,S were less likely to become seriously ill (*Guardian*, 18 October 2007). Importantly, the trial shows, for the first time, that the vaccine can be used safely in very young infants. Although not 100% effective, Joe Cohen of GlaxoSmithKline believes that “a vaccine with an efficacy of 60 to 70 per cent would have a tremendous public health impact”, given the high burden of malaria (*NewScientist*, 17 October 2007). Nevertheless, the researchers stress that existing antimalarial measures, such as bednets and insecticide spraying, will still be essential (*Nature News*, 17 October 2007).

Larger trials of the RTS,S vaccine are planned: “Next year we will start a trial in 16,000 kids in 10 sites in 7 African countries”, says Christian Loucq, director of the PATH Malaria Vaccine Initiative, which sponsored the research (*NewScientist*, 17 October 2007). If successful, it is hoped that it will be approved for widespread use by 2013.

Lucy Bird