

Is Lassa fever research and development at risk? A global funding analysis from the G-FINDER project

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Introduction

Lassa fever poses significant health and economic impacts in Africa. However, there remains no approved vaccine. Rapid diagnostics and broad-spectrum therapeutics are needed. R&D efforts have accelerated but face growing threats due to shrinking donor funding and shifting donor priorities. The Lassa fever coalition seeks to foster African-led R&D, underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of the current funding landscape. This study examines global R&D investments for Lassa fever, contextualized with the R&D pipeline, to inform investment priorities and support policy toward achieving the coalition's mission.

Methods

Leveraging the G-FINDER project, investment data from funders, intermediaries, and product developers (2015-2023) was analysed. Active pipeline candidates were identified from major pipeline data sources including clinical trial databases. Analysis was performed in Microsoft Excel by product type, R&D stage, and funder.

Results

Global funding for Lassa fever R&D totalled USD 449m between 2015-2023, with over half (USD 227m, 51%) directed towards vaccines. The US NIH was the largest funder, contributing USD 223m (50%) primarily for basic research (USD 102m, 46%). CEPI provided USD 171m (38%), focused almost entirely on clinical vaccine development. Nearly all funding came from high-income countries, particularly the US government (USD 234m, 52%). The current pipeline has 46 candidates – 16 vaccines, 9 drugs and 13 diagnostics, including two rapid tests in late development. Most vaccine candidates are viral vectors, with three in clinical trials, including the leading phase II candidate that meets the WHO target product profile. Biologics are predominantly monoclonal antibodies in preclinical development.

Conclusion

Lassa fever R&D funders are few and heavily reliant on the US government, a concerning vulnerability amid shifting donor priorities. While vaccine R&D has advanced, most countermeasures remain in early development. Urgent efforts to diversify funding and increasing domestic investment are essential. Without this, the opportunity to deliver effective countermeasures against Lassa fever risks being missed.