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InterVac poised to take vaccine discovery in Canada to a new level

Canada's capacity to develop vaccines for both humans and animals got a major boost this week with the official opening at the University Saskatchewan of the \$140-million International Vaccine Centre (InterVac)—the country's largest single investment in vaccine research infrastructure to date.

The state-of-the-art vaccine research centre—one of the largest of its kind in the world—uses the most advanced technologies to develop vaccines against new and re-emerging infectious diseases safely and more quickly than ever before.

“Our government is proud to be providing scientists with the facilities and equipment they need to protect the health of Canadians and commercialize their groundbreaking research,” said Prime Minister Stephen Harper. “This new facility will create jobs for highly skilled researchers, provide valuable training for students and build on our international profile as a leader in public health.”

InterVac will enable larger-scale vaccine research and development than is currently possible in Canada and will help alleviate a worldwide shortage of specialized containment facility space for addressing many re-emerging and emerging diseases, the majority of which originate in animals.

The facility is designed to safely study infectious diseases that require containment level three (CL3) facilities such as pandemic influenza, HIV/AIDS, SARS, West Nile virus, tuberculosis, and prion diseases such mad-cow disease and chronic wasting disease. Certification by federal regulatory agencies will begin this fall.

Noting that InterVac is one of the few CL3 research facilities in the world with an educational mandate, University of Saskatchewan president Peter MacKinnon said InterVac will provide international calibre training opportunities for graduate students and attract leading scientists from around the world.

“This stellar addition to our unique life sciences cluster is an important national resource that will advance development of the next generation of vaccines to protect animal and human health, while fostering international collaborations and partnerships to help prevent a global pandemic,” said MacKinnon.

The facility will be operated by the University of Saskatchewan Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization (VIDO), a world leader in research and development of vaccines for humans and animals. VIDO holds more than 80 patents and has successfully developed several commercialized vaccines.

Producer groups, companies, and academic and government scientists are already lined up to use InterVac. "When we begin operations in the spring of 2012, we expect to be operating at close to full capacity," said Dr. Paul Hodgson, associate director of business development. "Our number one goal is to help get vaccines to the user much sooner than ever before."

"InterVac will be a world-class partner for the vaccine industry by helping to strengthen Canada's vaccines R&D capabilities for level 3 infectious diseases," said Mark Lievonen, president of Sanofi Pasteur Limited.

Karen Chad, University of Saskatchewan vice-president research, noted that university is the only one in Canada that combines on a single campus a CL3 vaccine research centre with veterinary, agricultural, and medical schools. The campus is also home to a new multi-disciplinary health sciences centre, a renowned toxicology centre, a highly successful research park, and new graduate schools of public health, public policy, and environment and sustainability.

"InterVac enhances our capacity to develop new tools, technologies and policies for preventing disease and saving both human and animal lives," she said. "Through collaborative research and a wide array of partnerships, we are at the forefront of integrating human, animal, and ecosystem health to address threats to the 'one health' we all share."

InterVac, which will build on VIDO's 35-year history of generating more than a billion dollars in net economic impact, will enhance the university's capacity as an engine of growth in Saskatchewan, she said.

Capital funding for InterVac was provided by the federal government, the Saskatchewan government, the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the University of Saskatchewan, and the City of Saskatoon.

"InterVac is helping secure our province's future by contributing to a world-class life-sciences cluster, strengthening Saskatchewan's infrastructure in health, post-secondary education and research," said Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall.