HIDRU Researchers Share South Africa's Contributions at CoVICIS Annual Meeting in Madrid

From 27–28 March 2025, Mrs. Trisha Ramraj and Dr. Reshmi Dassaye of the HIV and Other Infectious Diseases Research Unit (HIDRU) at the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), and Prof Glenda Gray represented the South African investigators at the annual **CoVICIS Consortium Meeting** in Madrid, Spain. The EU-Africa Concerted Action on SAR-CoV-2 Virus Variant and Immunological Surveillance (CoVICIS) is a multidisciplinary research initiative uniting partners from Switzerland, Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Ethiopia, and South Africa, aimed at understanding the evolution of SARS-CoV-2 to inform and support global pandemic control efforts.

The consortium focuses on monitoring the emergence and spread of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern (VOCs) across diverse populations, including adults, children, vaccinated individuals, post-COVID-19 patients, and immunocompromised individuals (such as people living with HIV). The project also seeks to characterize the virological properties of emerging variants and define immune correlates of protection derived from infection or vaccination.

South Africa's contributions to CoVICIS are anchored in three studies—**SISONKE**, **COVID Kids**, and **CoKiDSS**—which examines the clinical outcomes and immune responses in vaccinated adults and/or unvaccinated children infected with different VOCs.



Prof Gray presented data on immunological responses to one or two vaccine doses amongst health workers with and without HIV. As compared to one vaccine, additional boosts provided protection against severe disease and death. The vaccines induced good immune responses in People Living with HIV.

Mrs. Trisha Ramraj, Project Manager of the **COVID Kids** study, presented findings on the clinical characteristics of SARS-CoV-2-related illness in hospitalized neonates, children, and adolescents (ages 0–19) in low- and middle-income countries. Data were collected from 15 network hospitals across four provinces. The study showed that during periods of high SARS-CoV-2 transmission, children were not spared and bear a substantial burden of disease. Since October 2024, a subset of these hospitals implemented an immunological sub-study to better understand paediatric immune responses.

Dr. Reshmi Dassaye, Co-Principal Investigator of the **COVID Kids School Study (CoKiDSS)**, shared data showing high SARS-CoV-2 IgG seroprevalence among learners in grades 1–7, as well as their parents and teachers, in Ndwedwe, KwaZulu-Natal—approximately three years into the pandemic. This high prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 antibody positivity is likely the result of repeated waves of community transmission in South Africa and may provide some degree of protection against future severe disease in this population.

The meeting concluded with reflections on the transition from *pandemic to endemic* COVID-19. Critical questions emerged around how best to continue protecting vulnerable populations: Which vaccines should we prioritize? Do we need new, safer vaccine strategies? And how can we improve public understanding and vaccine uptake through sustained advocacy?

The SAMRC is proud to be part of this international collaboration and remains committed to advancing science in support of equitable pandemic responses.