

Open Philanthropy Backs the Search for New Cures through Old Treatments

Paul Karon | December 18, 2024

In late 2022, [Open Philanthropy](#) launched its Global Health Research & Development program to support the search for new vaccines, drugs and other tools to improve global health — particularly for people living in the world's low- and middle-income countries. One of its first grantees was Cures Within Reach, a global nonprofit that identifies and funds clinical research to repurpose already-approved generic drugs and other inexpensive and readily available potential treatments — work that seemed tailor-made for Open Philanthropy's [effective altruist approach to global health](#).

In the spring of 2023, Open Philanthropy made its first grant to CWR, \$800,000, to fund clinical research in LMICs. Cures Within Reach went on to fund 11 clinical trials through the grant — trials that were conceived and led by scientists on the ground in the countries in question. Among those studies was a trial by researcher Mainga Hamaluba, at KEMRI Wellcome Trust Research Programme in Kenya, which sought to use an existing drug called unithiol, prescribed for poisoning of heavy metals, as a treatment for snakebites — a serious threat in many countries, particularly in rural settings. The CWR-funded trial's promising results led to a larger, \$5.4 million grant from Open Philanthropy to advance study of unithiol and another drug into Phase 2B clinical trials in Ghana and Brazil.

That was just one of the studies that has demonstrated the value of CWR's approach, and now Open Philanthropy has renewed its support with a new grant of approximately \$1.5 million. The grant renewal will support CWR's ReGRoW initiative, launched in 2019 to identify and fund clinical trials led by LMIC-based researchers into the use of readily available generic medicines, nutraceuticals and/or indigenous medicines.

Cures Within Reach lets researchers in LMICs set their own priorities

I first wrote about [Cures Within Reach](#) a few years ago. The organization, which is supported by a range of individual donors, foundations and corporations, has been one of the sector's leading backers of repurposing-oriented research. Originally, CWR supported general research and the development of new drugs and therapies, but eventually, president and

CEO Barbara Goodman and the team recognized the potential of repurposing to identify effective treatments faster and far more cheaply than developing new drugs.

Note that this type of study isn't just for the benefit of low- and middle-income countries. CWR-funded repurposing research helps people with health challenges of all sorts around the globe. "We saw an unmet need in the philanthropic community to fund research to focus on things that already have been shown to be safe and effective, and to fast track them straight into patients in a new proof of concept or pilot study," Goodman told me in 2021. The development of new drugs typically runs into the billions; repurposing a drug can still be expensive, but it's millions instead of billions. The majority of the projects CWR funds are pharmaceuticals; the rest goes to solutions like medical devices, diagnostics, nutraceuticals and supplements.

From the 2019 launch of its LMIC health research effort, Cures Within Reach has never limited the program to any specific geographical region or disease category, explained Goodman in a recent interview. A goal was to allow the health professionals and scientists in those countries determine their health and research priorities.

"The snakebite trial 2020 is a perfect example, because had we limited the program to something like oncology or infectious diseases, we wouldn't have gotten that submission," Goodman said. Other studies of low-cost generic drugs or supplements CWR is funding include the use of sodium bicarbonate to reduce maternal and fetal death from acidosis during obstructed labor in Uganda; a generic drug combination to treat acute myeloid leukemia in Tanzania; and the addition of zinc to reduce infections related to sickle cell anemia in Uganda.

Cures Within Reach has funded studies by researchers at universities and institutions in Uganda, Tanzania, Madagascar and Benin, Bangladesh, India and Brazil, among other countries. Some studies are ongoing, and some, like the snake bite trial, have led successfully to substantial additional funding from other sources. Under the new grant from Open Philanthropy, CWR will fund another 16 clinical trials over the next two years — as before, all research will be proposed and conducted by scientists in LMICs.

Dustin Moskovitz and Cari Tuna carry forward the effective altruist flag

[Open Philanthropy](#), which is backed primarily by the wealth of Facebook cofounder Dustin Moskovitz and wife Cari Tuna, has long been a flagship funder — if not *the* flagship funder — for an overtly [effective altruist approach](#), especially since Sam Bankman-Fried’s 2022 implosion. And while they’re only a fraction of the Gates Foundation’s size, the group of philanthropic vehicles affiliated with Moskovitz and Tuna are also embracing a wide range of global health work — typically with an eye toward [“low-hanging fruit.”](#) i.e., doing things like tackling lead poisoning — or repurposing already approved drugs at far lower development costs. This corner of the philanthrosphere is also growing quickly, with [new infusions from Moskovitz’s sizable coffers](#).

Recognizing that billions of people living in poorer, low- and middle-income countries lack access to lifesaving medicines and other treatments, through its Global Health Research & Development program, Open Philanthropy aims to invest in the development and accessibility of treatments for such scourges as tuberculosis, malaria and diarrheal diseases, among other health threats that are far less widespread in wealthy nations.

An important aspect of the expansion of Open Philanthropy’s grant to CWR is the added focus on what’s referred to in the public health space as “community engagement.” This involves efforts to ensure that people in the community understand the purpose of clinical research, trust that the scientists are working in their best interest and see the value of participating in the research; ultimately, community engagement processes ensure that the results of studies are disseminated to people in the countries and communities involved.

“Our favorite and most impactful way to measure our success is the follow-on funding that our researchers are getting,” Goodman said. CWR’s goal is not to fund a drug all the way to approval as a treatment; its goal is to “de-risk” the therapeutic candidate at the start of the process, to show their promise and get them past the funding and development bottleneck that stymies a lot of potential cures and treatments. It’s one example of science-oriented philanthropy fulfilling the role it’s supposed to: funding new or risky ideas that have a tough time attracting support from industry or government.