The Global Health Technologies Coalition advocates for research and development of tools to prevent, diagnose and treat global diseases so health solutions are available when needed. Coalition Director Kaitlin Christenson explains the organisation’s efforts to inform policy makers on global health issues and drive health technology development.
Could you introduce the Global Health Technologies Coalition (GHTC), outlining its aims and the reason for its inception?

We are a group of nearly 30 non-profit organizations, working together to increase awareness of the urgent need for health products intended to save lives in the developing world. GHTC was established to improve policy makers’ knowledge on global health issues and the tools required to fight them. We also identified a clear need for an R&D advocacy community that could operate without regard to specific diseases or products. In addition, we noted the critical importance of public sector funding for research targeting neglected diseases and policies that could support such research – one area with which the private sector doesn’t often engage.

We are supported largely by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which allows us to work on four different key functions. The first is to build, and then support and maintain, an informed and influential constituency or community for global health technologies and R&D. Second, we conduct policy analysis that enables us to inform, develop and pursue a strategic advocacy agenda that we develop jointly with our members and advocacy partners. Third, we are performing outreach and pursuing strategic alliances with, for instance, other advocates, technical bodies, researchers and the private sector. Finally, and most importantly, we aim to inform and educate policy makers about our policy positions.

Rather than advocating for specific diseases, drugs or devices, GHTC’s mission is to support policies and funding to encourage global health improvements. How are you fulfilling this goal?

In the early days of the Coalition, we assessed the greatest barriers to the development and introduction of lifesaving health products. It was found that, essentially, three types of policy solutions could make a significant impact on the ability to develop new technologies: funding for research; strong regulatory pathways to ensure that only safe and effective products reach those in need; and mechanisms to incentivise the private sector and other stakeholders to participate more fully in research for neglected diseases.

As a Coalition, we are advocating for increased financing, coordination and strategic investments by the US Government in global health R&D. In a similar vein, we are also calling for the US Government to coordinate with other major donors through global policy frameworks. In addition, we call for streamlined regulatory processes to accelerate licensing of safe and effective global health technologies, and we advocate for the adoption of a portfolio of market-based incentives to encourage private industry investments in global health R&D. To implement those policy solutions, we work with the US Congress, federal agencies and normative bodies including the World Health Organization (WHO). Our work aims to build champions for these issues and arm them with evidence to make a strong case for investment in global health R&D and implementation of policies that support it.

Which key issues are the Coalition focusing on at present?

As with many countries, the political and economic environment in the US has changed radically over the past few years. We have seen how political gridlock and stalemates have stood in the way of reaching timely agreements around the US federal budget and how indiscriminate, widespread cuts through sequestration and government shutdowns have significantly and negatively impacted global health research projects. Our goal is to educate and inform US policy makers about the need for long-term budget solutions that protect funding for global health product development. We are also seeking greater alignment among US federal agencies involved in global health research to ensure that gaps in research programmes are addressed and that there is a cohesive approach to global health product development across the US Government.

At the same time, we are looking at global debates and discussions that have the potential to impact the ways in which global health research is conducted. One such debate surrounds the Sustainable Development Goals. These are intended to follow on from the Millennium Development Goals, which framed key targets to improve the health and wellbeing of people around the world. It is critical that the Sustainable Development Goals provide adequate attention to R&D as part of a solution for solving development challenges.

In the next few years, a global debate will culminate at the World Health Assembly on greater coordination and alignment of R&D investments and programmes. We have seen some strong proposals made to improve investments made by public sector donors, and we are very keen to ensure that any frameworks put in place are well-informed, as well as based on evidence and the experience of the global health non-profit and R&D community.

Despite the rapid increase of global scientific and technological developments, low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are often excluded from access to effective and affordable health technologies. Is GHTC working with such countries to change this?

We see a potential for LMICs to play a greater role in both funding and conducting research. Our goal is to use global dialogue, debates and policy mechanisms to improve and strengthen local innovation systems in many of the countries where neglected diseases are endemic. That means greater national investments in R&D by LMICs, as well as partnership between them and high-income countries to build local research capacity, for instance, through transfer of technology and knowledge.

Can you provide examples of emerging health technologies or devices that have the greatest potential to reduce suffering and save lives?

One innovation that has been really exciting within the global health community is the MenAfriVac® vaccine, which is intended to address meningitis A in sub-Saharan Africa. It is the first vaccine developed specifically to address the needs of Africa, and it is low cost and able to withstand cold chain constraints. Since the production of
MenAfriVac®, there has been rapid rollout through various vaccination campaigns across Western and Central Africa. Astounding results have been achieved in terms of very low or no incidence of meningitis A where the vaccine has been delivered. This intervention was developed specifically with developing countries in mind. It involved a consortium of stakeholders across four continents, including the US Government, WHO and PATH, a non-profit product developer. It also included the transfer of technology from a high-income country to the Serum Institute of India, an Indian vaccine manufacturer, in order to achieve low pricing and sustainable supplies of quality-assured vaccine. This was a very exciting piece of progress in the global health arena.

Additionally, a spectrum of products is being developed that has enormous potential. For instance, new vaccines to prevent tuberculosis are needed, and great progress is being made in advancing these vaccine candidates. We have recently seen progress in products to treat malaria, particularly those that have paediatric implications, as well as technologies such as microbicides, which are intended to provide women with woman-initiated HIV prevention products.

Can you outline your duties as Coalition Director? How do prior achievements and experiences inform your current work?

My role is to work with our members to develop and advance the Coalition’s advocacy priorities. This means following and engaging with policies and debates in the US and globally, building relationships with government officials, advocacy partners and other technical bodies and essentially ensuring that our perspectives and policy positions are well represented and respected in key policy dialogues.

My varied background has included work on HIV and adolescent reproductive health in Kenya, exploring policy mechanisms for the future introduction of a malaria vaccine and looking at the key scientific drivers that could contribute to ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I have had the unique experience of working from the country level all the way through to the global level, allowing me to see how policy change can make a true impact on health outcomes, and to witness the need for new health products that can help prevent, treat and diagnose some of the greatest health burdens of our time.

Why is vaccine development such a major priority, and how is the Coalition involved with the transfer of vaccines from the laboratory to the health clinic?

We see vaccines as one of the most cost-effective health solutions in terms of saving lives, preventing disease and decreasing childhood mortality rates, but they are not the only tool that we prioritise. We also see the need for effective drugs to treat diseases and address health conditions, as well as the importance of developing diagnostics and other health tools to contribute towards achieving global health goals. Our objective is to ensure that research for all global health technologies is funded from the very basic stages all the way through to proof of concept, and to ensure this process is efficient and timely so that we can reduce delays or lag-times in a product reaching populations in need.

How are you partnering with scientists and researchers?

The Coalition sees scientists and researchers as critical partners in an advocacy movement to build a policy environment that supports global health R&D. We often work with researchers and scientists to help bring their evidence and expertise to policy makers. When we visit Members of Congress and make an effort to build new congressional champions, for instance, we may be able to bring scientific experts along to bolster our case – why the research is so critical, what impact the research is having, what might be some new scientific advancements that a policy maker could be excited about. We also hope to convey these issues through congressional briefings or other types of public events or publications we undertake. There are great opportunities to partner with scientists and researchers on that advocacy agenda.

Where will the Coalition be focusing its efforts over the next five years?

We will always attend to the critical importance of public sector funding for global health R&D and will continue to be champions and advocate for the US Government sustaining its investment, building upon its investment and coordinating with other global stakeholders. We will look further into some of these global dialogues, such as how the World Health Assembly and UN Member States will implement new policies, including a potential framework for global health R&D, and how the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals will take place. We will also be continuing to look at policies to build capacity and support the strengthening of global innovation systems in LMICs by building national investments, research infrastructure and capacity.