

28 November 2012

The South African Parasites' Control Task Force meets World experts in Washington DC

This November the Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) community - 501 participants from 65 countries - including the World Health Organization, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Pharmaceuticals, Academia, and Governments of endemic countries convened at the World Bank in Washington DC.

South Africa was amongst them thanks to UKZN's Dr Zilungile Kwitshana and Dr Eyrun F. Kjetland.

Uniting to combat Neglected Tropical Diseases, the meeting aimed to provide the resources necessary across sectors to remove the primary risk factors for the neglected tropical diseases: poverty and exposure – by ensuring access to clean water and basic sanitation, improved living conditions, vector control, health education, and stronger health systems in endemic areas. According to the meeting, Health workers and teachers are key in the delivery of health to children, who carry the heaviest burden of Bilharzia and Soil Transmitted Worms. Neglected Tropical Diseases are highly endemic in rural and semi-urban informal settlements of South Africa.

Neglected Tropical Diseases are a major cause of physical and mental impairment, causing poverty and lifelong disease and have been implicated in playing a role in the transmission and progression of other high priority diseases (HIV, TB and malaria). It is not the diseases that are neglected, it is the infected people that are neglected, says the World Bank's Dr Adeyi. Every child and every infected adult deserves protection. The fight against the NTDs is endorsed by the World Bank, whose mission is to reduce poverty and accelerate shared prosperity. Together, the NTD community mapped out the concrete actions needed to ensure the necessary supply of drugs and other interventions to help control Bilharzia and Soil-Transmitted Worms by 2020.

Many endemic countries have succeeded in reducing the suffering caused by NTDs. All the African countries have taken action against the diseases. They have taken advantage of the free drugs donated by 30 drug companies and a major injection of funding for treatment and control. Mozambique's Minister of Health thought Mozambique was the last passenger to join the train of treatment for neglected tropical diseases, but South Africa is yet to come on board, with its draft master plan for control in preparation. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Julie Jacobsen emphasised the importance of South Africa's participation.

The private sector has done their part. The generic drugs are available, free of charge and the onus is now on the countries to accept the donations and to deliver the pills. The economic status of the patients should not prevent or exclude access to drugs. We must go to those, most in need, where the road ends. Somehow we must get the job done, says Nigeria's Dr. Onyeze to the South African team.

Facts about Bilharzia

It is estimated that 5 million South Africans need treatment. Bilharzia is a waterborne parasitic infection that damages internal organs, with school absenteeism, urinary and gynaecological symptoms, anaemia and cognitive and economic under-performance. Controlling the disease is relatively easy. A single oral dose of the drug praziquantel, when paired with health education, annually reverses up to 90 percent of the damage.

Facts about Soil Transmitted Worms

Soil transmitted worms include roundworms, flatworms, pinworms and others. When infected individuals defecate in the soil, the worm eggs in the faeces contaminate the soil, drinking water, fruits and vegetables, and new individuals get infected through this cycle. Over many decades, surveys have reported that between 70-100% of school children are infected with these soil transmitted worms - (in many provinces of the country). Infected children cannot perform well at school, have stunted growth, and serious other complications can occur. Adult infection rates have been reported between 40-60% in areas with poor sanitation and lack of clean water supply. Much of South Africa experiences tropical weather and many of its regions allow year-round transmission of both

STH and schistosomiasis. Chronic worm infections have been implicated to play a role in the acquisition, transmission and progression of the other high priority diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis and malaria. Controlling and eradicating worm infections is feasible with regular treatment with single doses of Albendazole (Zentel) or Mebendazole (Vermox), health education and provision of clean water to the communities.

Quotes

“Progress is nothing if it is not at the service of those that need it most” (Minister of Health Dr L. Manzur, Argentina)

“I am invisible because you refuse to see me” (Dr. O. Adeyi, World Bank)

“They are someone. They are a son or a daughter, mother or father, the sister or brother of someone” (Minister of Health, Mozambique, Dr. O. Amiel)

Facts about the Nigerian Bilharzia Campaign

In a historic donation of free tablets, millions of Nigerians are benefiting from this treatment. As of 2011, Nigeria has provided more than 6 million treatments. The health education message is not to urinate or defecate in water and to take praziquantel annually when offered. In South Africa the donated treatment still requires clearance from the Medicines Control Council.

Facts about the meeting in Washington: <http://www.unitingtocombatntds.org/>

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