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WHO, SMITHKLINE BEECHAM TO COOPERATE ON ELEPHANTIASIS ELIMINATION

Over 1 billion people in 73 countries are at risk of contracting lymphatic filariasis (elephantiasis) and there are over 120 million people already affected. To counter this scourge, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the global healthcare company SmithKline Beecham PLC (SB) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding whereby SB will donate the drug albendazole free of charge to WHO for use by governments and other collaborating organizations working for the global elimination of the disease. SmithKline Beecham will continue donating the drug until the disease is eliminated and it will also contribute programme assistance and health education.

“This will be one of the largest global disease elimination programmes ever undertaken by public health authorities,” said Dr Hiroshi Nakajima, WHO Director-General. “Lymphatic filariasis is one of the major causes of individual disability and associated socio-economic burden in the world. We are delighted that SmithKline Beecham has generously agreed to collaborate with WHO and its Division of Control of Tropical Diseases in this important initiative.”

The World Bank, the largest international health care financier worldwide, strongly endorses this initiative.

It is estimated that, because nearly one-fifth of the world's population, spread across the globe, is at risk of infection, it will take approximately 20 years to eliminate the disease. WHO's Filariasis Control Programme (CTD/FIL) has been

working with WHO's country and Regional offices and with its Collaborating Centres to support the efforts of endemic countries to formulate plans of action, which take advantage of dramatic advances made in filariasis control, to eliminate lymphatic filariasis.

New research has determined that albendazole, which is manufactured by SmithKline Beecham, and which has already become a standard treatment worldwide to combat intestinal parasites, is 99% effective against the parasite that causes lymphatic filariasis when simultaneously administered with other antiparasitic drugs. The disease, carried by mosquitoes, often leads to elephantiasis, the disfiguring enlargement of the arms, legs and genital organs.

The donation by SB will mean that countries with the need but formerly without sufficient resources to acquire the best medications available to treat filariasis will now have the opportunity to take advantage of the advances made in filariasis control.

"We expect to see a dramatic decline in lymphatic filariasis within five to six years after the programme gets underway later this year," said Mr Jan Leschly, Chief Executive of SB. "The entire programme will run for at least 20 years, longer if necessary. Efforts to eliminate the carrier of the parasite, the mosquitoes, have failed. The best opportunity of eliminating lymphatic filariasis is through medicines used to break the cycle of infections between the mosquitoes and humans."

Because of the drug regimen needed to interrupt the parasite's life cycle - one dose yearly for 4-5 years to all people in infected areas - SmithKline Beecham's commitment to donating sufficient albendazole to this programme will require several billion doses.

A second major benefit of the use of albendazole for the control of lymphatic filariasis comes from the fact that at the same time albendazole is attacking the filarial parasite it will also treat infections with gastro-intestinal parasites (including hookworm). Thus, the public health benefits of such a treatment regimen will extend beyond those anticipated from eliminating one of the oldest, most debilitating parasitic diseases of humankind.

"The donation by SmithKline Beecham is being made at a particularly opportune time, since the necessary tools and strategies for diagnosing and treating this infection have been developed only recently but have proven so effective that we can now envisage not just control of this ancient scourge but even its elimination by the year 2020," emphasized Dr. Kazem Behbehani, Director of WHO's Division of Control of Tropical Diseases.

Mr Jim Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, has welcomed the WHO/SB initiative as an important example of a public/private-sector partnership: "SB's exceptionally generous action to address the filariasis problem worldwide is of major importance." Dr Ok Pannenberg, who is in charge of the Bank's health, nutrition and population investments in Africa, remarked that, "this is a long-term effort and the

ownership and continued commitment by both governmental and private-sector programmes will be the real test of effectiveness”.

Senior health officials from countries expected to benefit from the WHO-SB agreement have welcomed the initiative. “Egypt welcomes this important expression of concern and partnership between WHO and SmithKline Beecham, a public-private sector initiative that promises to stimulate enormous progress in our efforts to eliminate lymphatic filariasis globally,” said Professor Ismail Sallam, Minister of Health and Population of Egypt.

“We welcome this new donation programme and will now move forward to finalize Sri Lanka’s plans for a dynamic national filariasis elimination. A large number of voluntary workers and community-based organizations will assist the health authorities in supporting this project that is so important to our national health,” added Nimal Siripala de Silva, Minister of Health and Indigenous Medicine of Sri Lanka.

The Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development has also joined these collaborative efforts.

WHO is inviting both organizations of the United Nations family and other partners in health to join in this international programme to eliminate lymphatic filariasis.

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