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MAJOR PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNER, MERCK, WELCOMED TO LYMPHATIC FILARIASIS CONTROL EFFORT

World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland today welcomed the decision by international pharmaceutical manufacturer Merck & Co, Inc to join the WHO-led effort to eliminate lymphatic filariasis (elephantiasis). Merck has offered to make its drug "Mectizan" (ivermectin, MSD) available to the effort in Africa.

"Merck's generous contribution will greatly strengthen the global coalition to fight lymphatic filariasis, and in particular the private sector representation in this coalition. It includes partners from the governments of endemic and non-endemic countries, international organizations of the United Nations family and a number of important non-governmental institutions and other private companies - all working together to overcome this debilitating disease and to improve the health of those served by this effort," said Dr Brundtland.

Lymphatic filariasis is estimated to affect 120 million in 73 countries. More than one billion people or about 20 percent of the world's population are now vulnerable to this infection caused by parasitic worms.

The disease often leads to elephantiasis, the huge enlargement of arms, legs and genital organs, which causes profound physical and psychological disability. Efforts to eliminate the mosquito, the carrier of the parasite, have failed. The best opportunity of eliminating lymphatic filariasis is through medicines used to break the endless cycle of infections between the mosquitoes and humans. This can be done by single doses of two-drug treatment combinations based on albendazole, ivermectin and DEC.

The January 1998 announcement of the collaborative initiative to eliminate lymphatic filariasis by WHO and SmithKline Beecham (SB) (see Press Release WHO/12; <http://www.who.int>) included a pledge by SB to donate albendazole free of charge to WHO for use by governments and other collaborating organizations until lymphatic filariasis is

eliminated from the world as a public health problem. WHO's target date for achieving such elimination is 2020.

"The expansion of Merck's ivermectin donation programme to include lymphatic filariasis in Africa, which promises to help millions of people in some of the poorest areas of Africa, provides an outstanding example for others to follow. Many similar commitments will be needed in order to achieve the ambitious goals we have set for ourselves," added Dr David Heymann, Executive Director of WHO's Programme on Communicable Diseases (CDS).

Twenty-nine current and potential partners in the coalition will be holding a "Partners' Forum" in Geneva next week to discuss means of coordinating the inputs into the lymphatic filariasis elimination programme from a variety of governmental, international, private sector and nongovernmental organizations. The Governments of Japan and the United Kingdom, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, the World Bank and the US Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC), among others, have pledged their support.

Lymphatic filariasis is one of seven diseases that WHO is currently working to drastically decrease or eradicate. The fight against polio is in its final stages, as is that against leprosy. It is hoped that WHO-led efforts against Chagas Disease, dracunculiasis, measles and onchocerciasis will also conquer these diseases in coming decades.

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