



MINISTRY OF HEALTH

PRESS RELEASE

UGANDA MAKES TREMENDOUS PROGRESS TOWARDS ELIMINATION OF ONCHOCERCIASIS (RIVER BLINDNESS) DISEASE

Introduction:

The Ministry of Health in collaboration with partners has made tremendous strides in the Elimination of Onchocerciasis (River blindness). Onchocerciasis is a disease caused by a worm called *Onchocerca volvulus*. It is transmitted from one person to the other through the bite of an infected female black fly which mainly breeds in fast flowing rivers and streams.

The disease causes eye lesions, which can lead to impaired vision and blindness. It also causes ugly skin disease looking like leopard skin, which is characterized by severe itching and can be so severe that it disturbs sleep, concentration and work. The psychosocial impact of River Blindness includes emotional distress, stigmatization and social discrimination due to damaged skin lesions which sometimes lead to broken marriages.

The disease is common in 35 districts of Arua, Adjumani, Amuru, Bududa, Buhweju, Buliisa, Bushenyi, Hoima, Ibanda, Gulu, Kabale, Kabarole, Kamwenge, Kanungu, Kasese, Kibaale, Kisoro, Kitgum, Koboko, Kyenjojo, Lamwo, Manafwa, Maracha, Mbale, Masindi, Mitooma, Moyo, Nebbi, Nwoya, Oyam, Pader, Rubirizi, Sironko Yumbe and Zombo. More than three million people are at risk of acquiring the infection and over one million people are already infected.

It is estimated that in Kitgum, Lamwo and Pader districts where the river blindness strain is blinding, at least 5,400 people are blind or visually impaired with more than 159,000 debilitating skin disease.

Control of Onchocerciasis:

The Ministry of Health and its partners started its control programmes in early 1990s using ivermectin treatment of the affected communities. More than 70 person per every 100 persons affected in population has been under treatment for more than 10 years treating every 75 persons per every 100 in a community. The disease affected 70 people per every 100 people in the communities before the mass treatment was initiated in 1993. It has, however, now reduced to only 7 persons per every 100 persons in most endemic areas. This tremendous achievement in programme coverage and in reduction of the disease burden convinced the Ministry of Health to move from control programmes and launched an Elimination Policy with support from The Carter Center.

Elimination Policy:

The new strategy aims at elimination of the disease through a bi-annual treatment with ivermectin plus vector elimination. It is targeted at attaining elimination of the disease by 2020. It was launched in 14 districts covering six foci in January 2007 and implemented in a phased

manner, with a plan to cover all the isolated foci of the disease by 2015.

Key Achievements since 2007:

The Government of Uganda with support of partners has successfully achieved interruption of transmission of the disease in Mt. Elgon focus covering the districts of Bududa, Mbale, Manafwa and Sironko; and in Itwara focus covering Kabarole and Kyenjojo districts. The Ministry of Health will formally notify the districts concerned to sensitize the communities before stopping of all interventions including mass treatment. Interruption of transmission of the disease has also been achieved in Wadelai focus in Nebbi district. However, annual treatment with ivermectin in Wadelai will not be stopped because it is still needed for the elimination of Lymphatic filariasis in this focus. Epidemiological and entomological studies for delineating the limits of onchocerciasis foci in areas not yet under the elimination policy will continue.

The disease affects a total population of about 3,287,696 people in Uganda. Interruption of transmission has been attained in a total population of 445,534 people that is 13.6 % of the population. Over 450,000 people in Uganda have been rid of this debilitating disease. This implies that this year (2012), about 793,220 treatments will not be provided, thus saving a lot of resources for the elimination program

to invest in other river blindness foci that are launching the stepwise elimination. The districts will support the surveillance activities in the focus where the disease has been got rid of and will be integrated in the existing health service delivery for sustainability.

What are the benefits of eliminating River blindness from Uganda?

- A healthier population that is able to concentrate in more productive activities thus contributing to the reduction in poverty.
- Reduction in health expenditure towards controlling/eliminating river blindness.
- Health personnel involved in river blindness elimination will get time to work on other Neglected Tropical diseases.
- Improved school attendance and reduction in school drop outs.

Government Appeal:

- All districts where river blindness elimination has been attained are requested to ensure support for the necessary surveillance activities in the post treatment phase.
- Partners should increase advocacy at national and international levels to create more awareness and rally support for elimination activities in Uganda.
- Distribution of ivermectin twice a year in districts where elimination policy was launched should attain at least 90%

treatment coverage of all the eligible persons.

- Work closely with other onchocerciasis endemic countries that are bordering Uganda (DRC, South Sudan) in order to avoid disease re-infection.

Key Players:

- This success to the control of the diseases is attributed to the dedication of the Ministry of Health, districts local governments, the affected communities, and the partners that include; The Carter Center, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Bernhard Notch Institute, WHO, African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC) and Merck & Co.

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