

Press release

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Britain to protect more than 140 million in global effort to rid the world of neglected tropical diseases

Britain will supply more than four treatments every second for people in the developing world for the next four years as part of a global push to help eliminate infectious tropical diseases, International Development Minister Stephen O'Brien announced today.

British support is leading the way and will protect more than 140 million of the world's poorest men, women and children from the agonising pain caused by these avoidable infections which deform, disable, blind and kill.

The pledge marks a five-fold increase in Britain's support as part of an international effort to help rid the world of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), currently affecting one billion people and killing more than half a million every year.

It comes ahead of a conference in London on January 30th when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, governments, NGOs, multilateral organisations and the private sector will unite to help consign the diseases to history.

Sufferers of NTDs are often immobile with adults unable to work to support their families and children forced to miss school for weeks, or even months, at a time.

The diseases can force communities into deeper poverty as the disabled and unemployed adults struggle to afford food and basic services, including healthcare, and generations of children grow up with little education and few prospects for the future.

Britain's increased aid is largely focused on four diseases – lymphatic filariasis (elephantiasis), onchocerciasis (river blindness), schistosomiasis (bilharzia) and dracunculiasis (Guinea Worm).

It will help make Guinea Worm the second human disease ever to be eradicated in history by 2015, help secure the elimination of elephantiasis and river blindness and protect millions more from bilharzia.

International Development Minister Stephen O'Brien said:

"It is a tragedy that the lives of millions of the world's poorest people are still being destroyed by these ancient and avoidable tropical diseases when we have the means to tackle them.

“These diseases thrive on poverty and have horrendous consequences for sufferers - especially children – leaving them in debilitating pain with severe disabilities. And for those who survive, they are left trapped in poverty as they are unable to work or attend school.

“It is the victims of these diseases who have been neglected for too long. The world is increasingly coming together to build on the long-standing commitment of the pharmaceutical industry to rid the world of these terrible diseases which disable, blind and kill millions every year.

“British support will take the neglected out of neglected tropical diseases and will not just save lives - but transform lives. By preventing the spread of these diseases and treating their victims, we will enable them to go to school and work so that they can help themselves out of poverty and eventually no longer rely on aid.”

The additional support will initially enable Britain to increase its impact by:

- Providing 400 million treatments to protect 100 million people from elephantiasis to help towards its elimination. British support will prevent two million people from contracting the disease. Spread by mosquitoes, it is caused by parasitic worms and leads to the abnormal enlargement of the limbs and genitals, which is severely debilitating, disfiguring and stigmatising.
- Delivering 100 million treatments for bilharzia to improve the quality of life and avert serious illness in 40 million people to help save 10 million lives. Caught through contact with contaminated fresh water that contains parasites, it leads to chronic ill health, damages internal organs, impairs the growth of children and causes more than 200,000 deaths a year in Africa.
- Helping to prevent more than 3 million people from developing river blindness. This disease is transmitted through the bites of infected blackflies. Adult worms in humans develop, producing millions of larvae which live in the skin causing intense itching, disfiguring skin lesions and eye disease that can result in blindness.
- Helping to make Guinea Worm the second human disease ever to be eradicated in history by 2015. The water borne infection leaves people bed ridden for months, meaning adults are unable to work and children are forced to miss school. While the worm, which can grow up to three feet long, is not usually fatal, the wound where the worm emerges can develop bacterial infections such as tetanus which can be life-threatening.

Stephen O’Brien will attend the event in London, where Bill Gates, co-chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, chief executives of pharmaceutical companies and representatives from other donors will also make and renew commitments to tackle NTDs.

Notes to editors

Britain is increasing support for Neglected Tropical Diseases from £50 million to £245 million between 2011 and 2015. This includes funding for:

- The Carter Center (£20m) over four years to support the global campaign for the eradication of Guinea worm once other donors come forward to match British funding. There is no known cure or vaccine to prevent the spread of the disease so Britain’s support through the Carter Center will focus on containing the remaining cases and focusing eradication efforts on the last infected villages – principally in South Sudan, Mali, Ethiopia and Chad.

- The African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (£6m) over four years to provide 12 million treatments for 3 million people in 19 African countries, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria and Sudan.
- The Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (£22m) over four years to provide 400 million preventative treatments for elephantiasis to protect 100 million people in at least 12 African countries as well as Bangladesh and Nepal.
- Imperial College (Schistosomiasis Control Initiative) together with the Partnership for Child Development and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (£25m) over four years to provide 100 million treatments to protect 40 million people from schistosomiasis in at least eight African countries, including Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia.
- The UK is also designing programmes to protect millions from blinding trachoma, which affects over 40 million people and has left eight million visually impaired, and the second largest parasitic killer in the world visceral leishmaniasis, which is responsible for at least 30,000 deaths every year. The UK also plans to fund further research into the causes of and treatments for these and other neglected tropical diseases.

Ends

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