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INCREASED BENEFITS FOUND FROM WIDER USE OF ANTI-PARASITE DRUGS

Geneva - Encouraging new data from the wider distribution of anti-parasite drugs in pregnant women and very young children demonstrates that medicines commonly used to treat parasitic infections have much wider benefits than was previously thought. The data was presented during a two-day meeting from 29-30 November in Geneva of the Partnership for Parasite Control, hosted by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Anti-parasite drugs have long been used to treat school-age children in campaigns worldwide to improve health and educational outcomes. Intestinal worms can cause malnutrition, fatigue, organ damage, and in severe cases, cancer of the bladder. Anti-parasite drugs kill worms in the human body, as well as helping to prevent anaemia, and to maximize cognitive and physical development.

Due to safety concerns, the drugs were not widely recommended for young children or for pregnant women until 2002, when a WHO Expert Committee recommended that pregnant women and children from 12 months to five years old be included in all worm control strategies.

During the meeting, Nepal reported a significant improvement in maternal health, as well as a 41% drop in infant mortality at six months, in pregnant women who were given two treatments for parasites. This major study followed an investigation in Sierra Leone, where pregnant women given deworming medicine and iron supplements were found to have decreased anaemia incidence as well as improved iron status.

In a study in Sri Lanka, researchers found no variation in the birth defect rate among women who were taking anti-parasite treatment and those who were not, thus verifying the medicine's safety. Among young children, a recent study in Zanzibar demonstrated that in children under five years of age, anti-parasite treatment can reduce malnutrition by 62%, as well as reducing moderate anemia by 59%.

"We are overwhelmed by this evidence," says Dr Lorenzo Savioli, Coordinator of WHO's Parasite Control Programme. "We knew that there would be benefits from expanding deworming treatment, but we never imagined the impact would exceed even our most optimistic expectations."

With the new evidence illustrating that anti-parasite drugs have a range of positive impacts on young children and pregnant women, WHO recommends that treatment programmes worldwide should reach the many people who need them. "This is an opportunity to improve public health on a global level that must not be missed," says Dr Hiroyoshi Endo, Director of Control, Prevention and Eradication of Communicable Diseases.

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