



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

NOTE FOR THE PRESS

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Note for the media WHO/16
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WHO EXPANDS FIGHT AGAINST CHAGAS DISEASE WITH SUPPORT FROM BAYER

GENEVA -- The World Health Organization (WHO) is expanding the global effort to eliminate Chagas, a parasitic disease which affects an estimated nine million people, mostly children.

The expanded programme is supported by Bayer HealthCare, which manufactures nifurtimox, a drug used to treat the disease. Bayer HC has provided funds to expand WHO's Chagas disease elimination efforts along with 2.5 million tablets free of charge, allowing the treatment of an estimated 30 000 patients over a period of five years.

For decades, Chagas disease largely affected people living in rural areas of Latin America. The symptoms of the disease are silent and often appear many years after infection. Most people who have the disease do not know they are infected. In recent years, large-scale migrations of people from Latin America to other parts of the world have turned Chagas disease into a global problem.

Blood donations and poor safety in blood banks have led to infections with Chagas disease in countries outside Latin America as some people who may be unaware they carry the infection have donated their blood to the national blood supply. As a result, the disease has now appeared in several countries in Europe and various parts of the United States of America.

"This disease still poses a threat to so many people in Latin America and now that threat has spread to other countries via blood banks lacking adequate screening of infected donors. This provision is indeed an important step towards elimination efforts of Chagas worldwide," said Dr Mirta Roses Periago, WHO/PAHO Regional Director for the Americas Region.

Global Accessibility

The threat posed by Chagas disease in countries outside Latin America has prompted WHO to reformulate Chagas elimination efforts as a global programme. "The question of blood safety in blood banks and monitoring of patients is becoming an increasing problem in Europe and the United States. The problem now poses a threat to global public health and must be dealt with accordingly," said Dr Jean Jannin, WHO's Neglected Tropical Diseases Coordinator for Chagas. The elimination campaigns that once took place only in Latin America will be expanding to other countries in Europe and parts of the United States where Chagas cases are fast emerging.

There are currently two drugs effective in the treatment of Chagas disease, benznidazole and nifurtimox. Chagas endemic countries use one of the two to treat disease victims, as well as implementing control programmes to eliminate the insects that carry the disease. All nifurtimox drugs produced by Bayer HealthCare will be given to WHO for distribution to countries, ensuring accessibility of the drug to those who need it most. The provision will help treat an estimated 30 000 patients over five years.

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Silent Killer

An estimated 9 million people, mostly children, are still affected by Chagas disease. The disease is transmitted when a person unwittingly rubs the contaminated faeces of infected triatomine bugs into wounds, their eyes or mouth. The triatomine bugs become infected by sucking the blood of an already contaminated animal or person. After feeding, they pass a parasite called *trypanosoma cruzi* in their faeces.

Once a person has contracted Chagas disease, the infection may remain dormant for decades. Most people later develop cardiac complications, resulting in disability and even death. Intestinal complications are also known to develop in patients resulting in an enlarged oesophagus or colon which make it difficult for the person to eat normally or pass stool. This silent killer causes the slow swelling of its victims' internal organs causing their eventual deaths.

Optimism and Aim

This programme furthers WHO's strategy for global elimination of this disease. "We are pleased to be a reliable, long-term partner supporting the WHO in the fight against this serious and widespread disease," said Arthur J. Higgins, Chairman of the Executive Committee of Bayer HealthCare AG and Chairman of the Board of Management of Bayer Schering Pharma AG. "As a specialty pharmaceuticals company we are committed to addressing areas of unmet medical need and neglected diseases."

Up to now, regional initiatives in Latin America have led to a dramatic reduction in the number of cases from 16-18 million in 1990 to an estimated 9 million cases in 2006. Transmission of the disease has been interrupted in Chile, Uruguay, a large part of Brazil and vast areas of Central America, Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay. By expanding the network of Chagas control from regional to global levels, WHO hopes that global elimination of the disease will become a real possibility. This new agreement helps bring WHO closer to its aim of eliminating this global health problem once and for all.

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Also visit the WHO Regional Office for America's site on Chagas disease:

<http://www.paho.org/english/ad/dpc/cd/chagas.htm>.

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