

# Press release

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5 October 2011

## Britain to secure world-wide eradication of worm disease

Britain today announced it will provide major support to a new project that will make Guinea worm the second human disease ever to be eradicated in human history.

International Development Minister Stephen O'Brien said Britain will back a final push to wipe out the debilitating parasitic disease within this decade but insisted other donors provide much-needed additional funding.

The funding would form a vital part of the push from former US President Jimmy Carter to ensure that Guinea worm is consigned to the history books alongside smallpox.

If other donors come forward to match British funding, it would also become the first disease to be eradicated without the use of a vaccine or medicine.

The water-borne infection, also known as dracunculiasis, causes agonising pain and leaves people bed-ridden for months at a time, meaning adults are unable to work and children are forced to miss school for weeks, or even months, at a time.

While the disease is usually non-fatal, the wound where the worm emerges can develop bacterial infections such as tetanus which can be life-threatening.

Great strides have been made in eliminating Guinea worm disease since The Carter Center began leading the international eradication programme in 1986 when there were approximately 3.5 million cases in 21 countries in Africa and Asia. Worldwide, the disease has been reduced by more than 99 per cent.

It has been eliminated in Nigeria, Niger and Ghana in the last two years but cases remain in South Sudan, Ethiopia and Mali, as well as an isolated outbreak in Chad, with 1,797 cases worldwide in 2010, all of which were in Africa.

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 teaching people how to avoid the disease.

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British funding would help train and supervise locals to track any outbreaks and ensure that those infected did not use stagnant communal water sources such as ponds and dams.

It would also provide health education, ensure distribution of cloth filters for drinking water and ensure supplies of larvicide to kill the worm in the early stages of infection are sufficient in communities.

In addition to supporting the treatment and containment of Guinea worm disease, Britain helps fund the provision of clean drinking water and safe sanitation to prevent the spread of diseases like Guinea worm.

International Development Minister Stephen O'Brien said:

"Guinea worm is a painful disease of poverty and afflicts the world's poorest and most isolated communities. Families go hungry as parents are unable to work and they go without medical treatment because they cannot afford it.

"President Carter's commitment has brought Guinea worm to the brink of eradication. It has never been a question of if we can rid the world of this ancient disease – but when. For the price of a sandwich, we can prevent someone in the developing world from catching this terrible disease.

"Britain is ready to help fund the final push to eradicate this debilitating disease and we now need others to join us in taking this historic opportunity to rid the world of Guinea worm."

Former US President Jimmy Carter, founder of The Carter Center, said:

"Guinea worm is a painful disease, which has horrendous consequences for sufferers in terms of their immediate health and in terms of their education and employment. It prevents people from escaping poverty.

"I welcome the challenge laid down by the British government. The UK has shown its willingness and staying power to help eradicate this debilitating disease. I call on other donors to match their efforts."

Mr O'Brien will announce Britain's readiness to contribute to The Carter Center at an event in London hosted by President Carter and World Health Organisation Director-General Dr Margaret Chan.

### **Notes to editors**

- Britain will contribute £20 million to The Carter Center over four years to support the global campaign for the eradication of Guinea worm if other donors come forward.

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- The goal is to help The Carter Center stop transmission of the disease worldwide before 2015 and ensure World Health Organisation certification within three years after transmission is interrupted.
- In 1986, when The Carter Center began leading the international campaign, Guinea worm was endemic in 21 countries in Africa and Asia. For example, Ghana reported 180,000 cases of the disease when it undertook its first national count in 1989. In July 2011, Ghana announced that it had stopped transmission of Guinea worm, meaning that no new cases of the disease had been reported for over a year. Once the disease cycle is broken the parasite cannot survive to infect others.
- Had the Guinea worm eradication campaign not been initiated in 1986, it is estimated that 3.5 million Guinea worm cases would have continued to occur annually. The Carter Center estimates that the eradication campaign has averted around 79.2 million cases, with the cost per case averted estimated at \$3.47.
- Guinea worm is contracted through drinking water contaminated with microscopic Guinea worm larvae. About a year after drinking the contaminated water, a metre long spaghetti-like worm emerges from the afflicted person's body through a blister in the skin. If the worm comes into contact with water it ejects hundreds of thousands of larvae, which can trigger an unending cycle of the disease. There is no vaccine or medication for Guinea worm. The only treatment is manual extraction – a painful process that takes several weeks or months.
- A not-for-profit, nongovernmental organisation, the Carter Center has helped to improve life for people in more than 70 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; improving mental health care; and teaching farmers in developing nations to increase crop production. The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former US President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide. Please visit [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org) to learn more about The Carter Center.

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