DRC goes forward with sleeping sickness elimination

International Partners Support Government in Innovative Approach to Fight Devastating Disease

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Dit is de omschrijving

Today the Minister of Health of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Dr. Oly Ilunga Kalenga, officially launched the first National Day of Human African Trypanosomiasis (HAT). The recognition day celebrated the DRC governmentâ€™s commitment to eliminating HAT by 2020 and outlined the upcoming national strategy for achieving this goal, which includes new technologies and an innovative approach to early screening for the disease. It also recognized the contributions of a consortium of international partners, including the Belgian Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp (ITM) and the Belgian Development Cooperation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi), PATH, FIND, and the World Health Organization.

HAT, also known as sleeping sickness, is one of the most neglected—and fatal—diseases in the world. It is transmitted by the bite of the tsetse fly and is usually fatal if not treated. Nearly 85 percent of cases occur in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but efforts over the last decade have reduced the number of cases in the country from 27,000 in 1996 to fewer than 2,200 in 2015.

A concerted effort is underway to ensure the disease is eliminated in the DRC, which will pave the way for ending the disease worldwide. This effort has been catalyzed by the 2012 London Declaration on Neglected Tropical Diseases, which included a commitment to ending HAT, along with nine other neglected tropical diseases by 2020.

DRC’s commitment to eliminate HAT

“Carrying the heaviest burden of HAT cases, the government realized very early on that it needed to take the lead in the fight against this disease that only affects Sub-Saharan Africa. We see our efforts to eliminate this disease and many others as DRC’s contribution to making our world a better and healthier place to live in,” said Minister of Health Dr. Oly Ilunga Kalenga.

In early 2018, the DRC government will finalize its strategy for HAT elimination, being led by the Programme National de Lutte contre la Trypanosomiase Humaine Africaine (PNLTHA). Key to the strategy is stopping transmission of HAT, which requires treating people during the first phase of the disease, when it’s much harder to diagnose and is often confused with other diseases, like malaria.

The plan to eliminate sleeping sickness relies on a new rapid diagnostic test, treatment, and tsetse fly traps; an awareness-raising campaign; and digital technologies to help find and confirm cases. A cadre of “mini-mobile teams” is going door-to-door in remote provinces, screening more than 3 million people with the rapid test with the goal of finding and treating sleeping sickness before it spreads.

“In the past we have used active screening to reduce sleeping sickness cases significantly, but the moment we let up, the disease came back with a vengeance,” said Dr. Eric Mwamba Miaka, director of the PNLTHA. “We have learned our lesson. This time we will stay the course until the end.”

A strong partnership to transform people’s lives

“PATH is honored to work alongside the Congolese communities and government leaders to address some of the country’s toughest health problems. The opportunity around HAT is unprecedented. Working hand in hand with national, provincial, and local leaders and armed with resources from donors such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Belgian government, PATH looks forward to soon celebrating the end of this horrific disease which for

generations has debilitated and devastated populations in DRC. With new innovative treatments and interventions, coupled with determined efforts by national and international actors, we can end sleeping sickness in the DRC once and for all," said Trad Hatton, DRC country program director, PATH.

"While a coordinated response from all actors is absolutely necessary, the sustainable elimination of sleeping sickness will only be possible if new tools, both diagnostics and treatments, are made available. Fexinidazole, a new safe and effective oral drug developed by DND*i* with our industrial partner Sanofi, should be available to patients by 2019. It will represent a major step forward towards the sustainable elimination of the disease. This new all-oral treatment will mark a paradigm shift in the treatment of patients, and presents significant advantages over today's treatment, based on intravenous infusions, that can only occur in hospital-based settings," said Dr. Nathalie Strub Wourgaft, medical director, DND*i*.

"Through the scientific expertise of ITM and contributions to control efforts, Belgium has been partnering with the DRC against sleeping sickness for over a century. We are pleased to help our Congolese friends give this deadly disease the final push. This ambitious programme also reinforces basic health care, benefiting also the control of other infectious diseases and the health of the local population in general," said Yves Claeys, HAT program coordinator, ITM.

"In the DRC, the key elements needed to eliminate sleeping sickness are all in place. The Congolese government and local communities are deeply committed to seeing an end to the disease. Dedicated partners are developing and delivering the diagnostics, treatments, and vector control needed to identify, treat, and control the spread. We're proud to be a partner in the effort to end the suffering caused this terrible disease," said Matthew Steele, senior program officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Link

ITM's research into sleeping sickness

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