



Malaria Consortium Chairperson Visits

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British parliamentarian Stephen O'Brien, chairperson of the Malaria Consortium, an international NGO that provides delivery programmes to combat malaria, arrived in Maputo on Monday to see the work of the Consortium on the ground.

O'Brien is a member of the British Conservative Party, and is Shadow Minister of Health. He has been campaigning against malaria for 30 years, and told AIM that, as a member of parliament, he has "a platform for speaking out on a disease that kills a child in Africa every 30 seconds". O'Brien, who also heads the all-party parliamentary group on malaria in the British House of Commons, said it was "very important to cement the political will to use donor taxpayer money on things that work and make a difference".

He regarded malaria control as falling into that category.

Tackling malaria, he said, was "one of the best ways of bringing down child and maternal mortality rates".

On Monday morning, O'Brien met with Mouzinho Saide, the National Director for the Promotion of Health and Disease Control, the Health Ministry department responsible for the malaria control programme. He was "pleased that the Ministry recognises malaria as a major priority".

Of all the diseases that strike the Mozambican population, malaria remains the largest single killer. About six million cases of malaria are diagnosed in Mozambique a year, and 4,000 people a month are known to die of the disease. These figures are likely to be underestimates, since they do not include people suffering from malaria who are unable to reach a health unit.

Asked his views on treatment and prevention, O'Brien stressed that, given the highly adaptive nature of the anopheles mosquito and the plasmodium, the single celled malaria parasite it carries, there could never be just one treatment.

There were no "magic bullets", said O'Brien, and in order to lessen the risks of the mosquito and the plasmodium developing resistance, "you have to use all the weapons in the arsenal".

Representatives of the Swiss-based drug company Novartis have been in discussions with the Health Ministry to supply its anti-malarial drug Coartem. This drug is an artemisinin compound, made from sweet wormwood, a plant grown in China. Coartem was described in a study published in 2005 in the respected medical journal "The Lancet" as "the most effective treatment for malaria in children in Africa where resistance to conventional drugs is high".

Mozambique is committed to switching to Artemisinin-based Combination Therapy (ACT), and phasing out the previous drugs such as fansidar. However, O'Brien argued against the Health Ministry putting all its eggs in one basket.

"Coartem is proving to be a great success", he said.

Nonetheless, reliance on any one drug risked the reappearance of drug resistance. O'Brien believed a case could still be made for quinine-based drugs to treat intermittent malaria among pregnant women.

Similarly the spraying programmes to eliminate mosquitoes should not rely on just one type of insecticide. O'Brien believed that programmes were likely to be more effective using a variety of drugs and insecticides.

O'Brien also met on Monday with the country's First Lady, Maria da Luz Guebuza, and discussed the "Malaria-Free Children" campaign run by her office. On Tuesday he will look at the Malaria Consortium's work in the northern province of Nampula.