

Mass Drug Administration for Trachoma Improves Lives

Neglected Tropical Disease Control Programme in Southern Sudan

Prophet Muut Toro Gadeang emerged from his home to welcome the Malaria Consortium team who arrived to offer free trachoma treatment to his village in Mayom County, Unity State, and was immediately surrounded by excited children. The prophet, an important figure in Nuer culture believed to have the ability to communicate with the ancestors, knew first-hand the damaging effect that trachoma can have on peoples' lives. One of his wives, Mary Nyatuare Kerker, was now nearly blind after years of repeated trachoma infection had caused her eyelids to turn inwards so that the lashes rubbed against her eyeballs leaving her in constant pain. Eventually, her eyes became opaque and she is now almost blind.

"It is very difficult to see. Sometimes my eye still gets infected, becomes swollen and hurts as my lashes touch my eyeball. I put ash from cow dung onto my fingers, to catch the lashes and pull them from my eye. I have had this problem for 15 years, and for the last three years I have been unable to do household work."

To prevent cases like Mary's, Malaria Consortium conducted a round of mass drug administration (MDA) against trachoma, treating the entire population of Mayom County with antibiotics.

MDA is necessary because trachoma, known as "Waang Bil" in the Nuer language, is highly endemic throughout Unity State, with up to 80 percent of children infected with the bacterium, *Chlamydia trachomatis*. Infection usually begins in childhood, passed from eye to eye by flies or unwashed hands and face-cloths, and is particularly common in areas with poor sanitation and access to clean water. Years of repeated infection often leave people visually impaired or blind. The Nuer, whose primary income-generating activity is cattle herding, are at particularly high risk of trachoma infection because of the



Mary's trachoma infection caused her to lose her sight in her right eye and most of her vision in her left.

Photo: Jenn Warren

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Mary Nyatuare Kerker

high number of flies in the vicinity of their livestock.

Nearly 600 Community Drug Distributors trained by Malaria Consortium conducted a census of the villages to ensure that everyone was recorded for treatment and subsequently went house to house to treat all individuals. During the MDA, a total of 123,760 individuals were treated in Mayom County. Of the total, 5,720 infants aged less than six months received tetracycline eye ointment and 31,690



children aged six months to five years received azithromycin syrup or tetracycline ointment, while 86,401 children over five years and adults received azithromycin tablets according to their height.

Like many community members, Gadeang, the father of five children, was keen to protect them from the damaging consequences of repeated trachoma infections that have affected his wife.

“Mary has lost sight completely in her right eye and the problems in her left eye are getting worse. I cannot leave my wife alone and I make food for her and the children. When we were young, there was no medicine for my wife to take; it is good that you can help our community and prevent the disease here among the young children.”

Repeated MDAs of antibiotics will reduce the prevalence of trachoma infection and therefore make a major contribution towards the elimination of trachoma in Unity State.

To maximize impact and maintain elimination over time, however, implementation of the full SAFE strategy will be required. SAFE comprises: eyelid Surgery for trichiasis; Antibiotics for treatment of trachoma infection; Facial cleanliness; and Environmental improvements including building pit latrines (to reduce the number of eye-seeking flies), providing water sources (for face washing) and keeping home compounds clean. Malaria Consortium is working with the Government of Southern Sudan to build up the coordinated approach required to implement the full SAFE strategy in Unity State and beyond.

Children receive azithromycin syrup during the Mass Drug Administration
Photo: Jenn Warren

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