



onchocerciasis have been eliminated in 9 of the 13 foci in the Americas where it was endemic and all new cases of blindness have been halted in all 13 foci.

Merck also re-affirmed today its pledge to donate as much MECTIZAN as necessary for the elimination of onchocerciasis globally. With this renewed pledge, Merck's donation of MECTIZAN for onchocerciasis is estimated to reach 100 million treatments annually by 2010, making the program the longest-running medicine donation commitment in history.

"Merck will continue to donate MECTIZAN to all who need it for the treatment of onchocerciasis until the disease is eliminated as a public health problem," said Merck Chairman, President and CEO Richard T. Clark. "This is a commitment from which Merck will not waiver."

Onchocerciasis, one of the leading causes of preventable blindness worldwide, is transmitted through the bite of black flies and can cause intense itching, disfiguring dermatitis, eye lesions and, over time, blindness. It is hyper-endemic in 33 countries, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa and isolated areas of Central and South America, and Yemen. In October 1987 Merck announced it would donate MECTIZAN – the only well-tolerated drug known to halt the development of onchocerciasis – to all who need it for as long as necessary until onchocerciasis is eliminated as a public health problem.

### **Announcements Give Hope to Other Countries**

"This is the first time in history that we can confirm that transmission of the disease has been stopped on a country level by means of mass treatment with MECTIZAN, which gives all of us involved in the MECTIZAN partnership hope that continued progress is possible in other parts of the world," said Dr. Bjorn Thylefors, Director of the MECTIZAN Donation Program Secretariat.

Colombia's Ministry of Health made today's announcement based on epidemiological studies conducted by the Colombian onchocerciasis program and the Carter Center's Onchocerciasis Elimination Program of the Americas (OEPA), which showed that onchocerciasis infection levels had been maintained at a level low enough to effectively break the cycle of transmission. The program attributed the results to the strategy of twice-annual mass treatment with MECTIZAN. Based on these findings, experts from the Program Coordinating Committee of OEPA recommended that treatment with MECTIZAN should be

suspended. The World Health Organization (WHO) will certify the elimination of onchocerciasis following this announcement by the Colombian Ministry of Health.

Health officials from Guatemala and Ecuador also announced today that treatment with MECTIZAN would stop in 2008 in the Escuintla, Guatemala, and Rio Santiago, Ecuador, regions.

"In addition to the success announced last year in the Santa Rosa region in Guatemala, this means that 74,476 people in 190 communities are now free of the threat of onchocerciasis, and signals the potential for a future free of onchocerciasis in all of the Americas," said Dr. Mauricio Sauerbrey, Director of the OEPA.

Since 1989, more than 7.5 million treatments with MECTIZAN have been approved for distribution in Latin America by community health workers and non-governmental organizations. Treatment programs exist in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela. In addition to Merck, partners in the Mectizan Donation Program in Latin America include OEPA, The Carter Center, Lions Clubs International Foundation, Christian Blind Mission International, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the WHO / Pan American Health Organization, and local Ministries of Health.

### **About the MECTIZAN Donation Program**

To date, the MECTIZAN Donation Program has approved more than 530 million treatments for onchocerciasis to 33 countries in Africa, Latin America and Yemen and donated more than 1.8 billion MECTIZAN tablets, at a value of US \$2.7 billion. The program currently reaches more than 69 million people each year for the treatment of onchocerciasis; an estimated 40 million treatments of MECTIZAN are also approved each year for lymphatic filariasis through Merck's work with the Global Alliance to Eliminate Lymphatic Filariasis.

To ensure the appropriate infrastructure, distribution and support for the donation initiative, Merck established in 1988 the Mectizan Donation Program, working through a unique, multisectoral partnership, involving the WHO, the World Bank and UNICEF, ministries of health, non-governmental development organizations and local communities. The MECTIZAN Donation Program Secretariat is housed at the Taskforce for Child Survival and Development in Atlanta (USA).

Merck also established the MECTIZAN Expert Committee in 1988, an independent body of