



INTRO: The pharmaceutical company Pfizer has announced a major effort to eliminate the blinding eye infection trachoma by the year 2020. The target date was set by the World Health Organization. As Kerry Sheridan reports from V-O-A's New York Bureau, the highly contagious disease affects 150 million people around the world, and is the world's leading cause of preventable blindness.

TEXT: Trachoma begins as a bacterial infection that makes the eyelid swell and causes the eyelashes to rub against the cornea, causing pain, runny eyes, scarring, and eventually, blindness.

The disease is passed from one person to another through contact with infected eye fluids, either by hands or on clothes.

Women are three times as likely to become afflicted with trachoma, especially in the world's poorest regions of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Ten percent of the global population is at risk for the debilitating disease. An estimated six million people have lost their eyesight because of trachoma.

Dr. Jacob Kumaresan (Koh-MAHR-is-un) heads the International Trachoma Institute, or I-T-I, which is receiving the Pfizer grant. He says the disease has long-term implications, especially for women.

/// KUMARESAN ACT ///

Imagine a family with a mother who is visually impaired or blind. She cannot take care of her family and children, which means that family will remain poor. Most likely the oldest daughter has to take over the responsibilities of the mother, maybe be pulled out of school, and you can imagine that the second generation will also remain poor. Trachoma is a perpetuator of poverty.

/// END ACT ///

Trachoma can be halted with the use of an antibiotic called Zithromax (ZIH-throw-max).

Pfizer has donated eight million doses of Zithromax over the past five years. Over the next five years, Pfizer plans to donate 135 million more doses to treat 15 times as many people.

Paula Luff, a spokesperson for Pfizer, says even though Pfizer's latest plans to expand treatment are significant, the drug itself isn't necessarily enough.

/// LUFF ACT ///

Drugs are wonderful and Zithromax is a wonderful antibiotic, but it's a tool in the fight against trachoma. It's not the magic bullet.

/// END ACT ///

The antibiotic is only a part of how the I-T-I is treating trachoma-afflicted communities in nine countries, mostly within Africa.

Surgery is one option. A simple procedure can be performed locally to turn the eyelashes away from the cornea so scraping no longer occurs.

Encouraging residents to wash their faces as often as they can is another option that contributes to more sanitary conditions and a lower rate of infection. I-T-I also works to improve the availability of clean water and sanitation.

Dr. Fabrizio Bassani, head of the World Health Organization, says he hopes that this combination of approaches, called the "SAFE strategy," will eliminate trachoma worldwide in the next seventeen years.

/// BASSANI ACT ///

To introduce the "SAFE strategy" was important because it was the recognition of the behavioral dimension of the hygiene and the need for better sanitation and better socioeconomic development and this is what was missing in the early efforts.

/// END ACT ///

Health experts say Morocco is the most successful country in terms of eradicating trachoma so far. Since 1999, Morocco has reduced the prevalence of the disease by over 90 percent in young children, and the country is on track to eliminate trachoma completely by the year 2005.

I-T-I hopes to expand its treatment programs to Mauritania and Senegal in the near future. (Signed)