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\$200 mln urged to fight neglected African diseases

11 Oct 2005 00:01:47 GMT
 Source: Reuters

Background

By Ben Hirschler

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LONDON, Oct 11 (Reuters) - Parasitic diseases afflicting millions of African adults and children could be treated and cured for just \$200 million a year, a tiny fraction of the amount earmarked to fight

AIDS, medical experts said on Tuesday.

At present, the majority of those affected do not get treatment, even though three of the four drugs they need are given away free by manufacturers and the other costs just 7 U.S. cents.

Some 95 percent of the money donated to fighting disease in Africa currently goes to the "big three" -- HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.

Yet conditions such as bilharzia, sleeping sickness, river blindness, elephantiasis, hookworm and blinding trachoma afflict an estimated 500 million people in sub-Saharan Africa and are a major contributor to poverty.

"We need to get a better balance," Professor Alan Fenwick of Imperial College London told reporters.

"Instead of 95 percent of money donated going to malaria, HIV and TB, it would only need to be 90 percent and we could do an awful lot of cost effective treatment and help towards making poverty history."

Taken together, the "forgotten" diseases are responsible for 500,000 deaths a year and represent a burden in terms of disability which is approximately one quarter that of HIV/AIDS and half that of malaria.

"Because they disable rather than kill they fall off the political radar," said Professor David Molyneux of Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine.

The answer, according to Fenwick and Molyneux, is an integrated approach to treatment that makes preventative medicine against parasites as routine as child immunisation.

Such a programme could deliver a package of four drugs for just 40 cents per person a year.

That compares with a minimum of \$200 a year to treat HIV/AIDS, \$200 to treat a single episode of tuberculosis and \$7-10 to treat a single episode of malaria.

In an article published in the journal Public Library of Science Medicine, Molyneux and colleagues said \$200 million a year over five years would pay to get preventative drugs to 500 million individuals and permanently reduce the occurrence of disease.

There would also be big knock-on benefits for the fight against HIV and malaria, since people infected with these diseases are far more likely to get sick, or die, if parasites have already weakened their immune system.

The four drugs needed in the battle are albendazole, ivermectin and azithromycin -- provided free by GlaxoSmithKline Plc <GSK.L>, Merck & Co Inc <MRK.N> and

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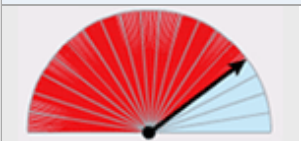
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Pfizer Inc <PFE.N> respectively -- and praziquantel, which costs 7 cents for a one-off tablet.

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