A HEALTHIER WORLD

Efforts to wipe out a disease that comes from dirty water are working.
A SMART SOLUTION

Experts say the world will soon be free of a painful disease.

Thirsty? No problem. Here in the United States, filling your glass is as easy as a trip to the kitchen sink. But in many parts of the world, clean, safe drinking water is out of reach.

“There are 748 million people worldwide who don’t have safe water to drink,” says Sarina Prabasi of WaterAid America, which helps people get clean water. “That’s about one in 10 people.” Each year, millions of people become sick after drinking contaminated water. But there is good news: One waterborne illness, Guinea worm disease, is close to being wiped out. Thirty years ago, about 3.5 million people in 51 countries in Asia and Africa had the disease. Today, there are only 126 cases left in the world, in just four countries (see map).

Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter and his team

Troubled Waters

The only way to contract Guinea worm is to drink from a lake or pond containing water fleas that carry the disease. Nothing happens until about a year after a person sips the water. Then a thin worm emerges, usually from a blister on the person’s leg, causing pain and making it difficult to walk.

It takes weeks to recover. For a child, that means weeks away from school. For a farmer, it means weeks away from the field. “Sometimes, three-fourths of a village would have the disease at the same time,” says Carter. “It would completely wipe out the productivity of... of the village.”

Taking Action

Carter’s team began working to defeat Guinea worm in 1986. They knew a simple way to protect against the disease: Filter water through a piece of cloth. Water becomes Guinea-worm-free. But convincing people to take even this simple step was a challenge.

Many did not want to believe that the worms were real. “We were so grateful to have been making them sick,” says Carter. “They would put on plays in their school.”

Health workers also taught people not to go to water while they had Guinea worm, since doing so spread the disease. Fewer people got sick each week.

“We’re very close now,” says Dr. Donald R. Hopkins, president for health programs at the Carter Center. “It’s not over until we get to zero.”

Countdown to Zero, a new exhibit at the Museum of Natural History, in New York City, chronicles efforts to wipe out six diseases, including Guinea worm. According to curator Mark Siddall, the goal is clear: “All humans on the planet live in a healthy community, and we have a shared responsibility to care of each other.”

—By Suzanne Nossel

GET WELL In 2007, Jimmy Carter comforts a young patient.