



## News Release

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### **Merck and Partners Make Progress In Long-Term Commitment To End River Blindness**

#### **Public Health Officials Confirm Significant Progress Toward the Goal of Elimination of River Blindness in Latin America by 2012**

WHITEHOUSE STATION, N.J., Nov. 11, 2010 – Public health officials at the 20<sup>th</sup> Inter-American Conference on Onchocerciasis in Antigua, Guatemala, confirmed that more than one-third of all Latin Americans who ran the risk of contracting river blindness (onchocerciasis), a leading cause of preventable blindness, are no longer at risk.

Officials attribute the successes in Latin America to a sustained public-private partnership led by the Carter Center that offers drug treatment and health education. The Carter Center – through its sponsorship of the Onchocerciasis Elimination Program of the Americas (OEPA) – assists national ministries of health in six affected countries in Latin America to conduct health education and distribute Merck's medicine, ivermectin (registered trademark MECTIZAN).

"Our continued progress toward eliminating river blindness is bringing improved health to hundreds of thousands of people in the Americas and the preservation of vision for future generations," said former U.S. President Jimmy Carter. "With continued focus, we can ensure that river blindness will no longer be a threat to people in the Western Hemisphere."

"Merck has donated MECTIZAN for more than 20 years and will continue to do so until river blindness becomes a disease of the past," said Richard T. Clark, chairman and CEO of Merck. "We are inspired by the progress in Latin America and continue to believe that public-private partnerships like this one are critical to achieving real improvements in global health."

In addition Merck's MECTIZAN Donation Program announced today it will donate \$150,000 to The Carter Center for post-treatment surveillance in those areas where the transmission of river blindness has been interrupted to confirm treatment with MECTIZAN is no longer necessary. The World Health Organization requires three years of surveillance before certifying that a country has officially eliminated river blindness. The funding will be in the form of a "challenge grant" whereby The Carter Center will raise an additional \$150,000 in matching funds, effectively mobilizing \$300,000 for the effort.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) passed a historic resolution in 2008, calling for transmission of river blindness in Latin America to be stopped by 2012 and elimination certification by 2015. In Latin America, river blindness historically affected people in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela. Today, approximately 184,310 or 34 percent, of the 542,945 people previously at risk are no longer threatened by river blindness.

Colombia and Ecuador already have reduced onchocerciasis infection rates low enough to effectively break the cycle of disease transmission country-wide. Other countries are making progress. According to Dr. Arturo Sanchez, director of the Vectorborne Diseases Program of the Guatemalan Ministry of Health, "Guatemala expects to interrupt onchocerciasis transmission in the last of its four affected areas very soon, thereby becoming one of the next countries in the region to achieve interruption of transmission."

### **The MECTIZAN Donation Program**

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. The MECTIZAN Donation Program reaches more than 100 million people annually.

In Latin America, since 1989, more than 9.6 million treatments with donated MECTIZAN have been delivered by community health workers and non-governmental organizations. Treatment programs currently exist in Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela. Colombia and Ecuador are undergoing post-treatment surveillance to confirm that transmission of river blindness has been halted.

### **About The Carter Center Sponsored-OEPA**

The Carter Center – through its sponsorship of Onchocerciasis Elimination Program of the Americas (OEPA) – is leading a coalition of partners in a historic effort to eliminate river blindness (onchocerciasis) from the Western Hemisphere by 2015 (inclusive of the three year required surveillance period). To wipe the debilitating disease from the few remaining pockets, the Center's OEPA assists the ministries of health in the six affected countries and partners with Merck, the Merck MECTIZAN Donation Program, PAHO, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Lions Clubs International Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as well as academic institutions and other organizations. The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide. For more information visit [www.oepa.net](http://www.oepa.net) or [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org)

**About Merck**

Today's Merck is a global healthcare leader working to help the world be well. Merck is known as MSD outside the United States and Canada. Through our prescription medicines, vaccines, biologic therapies, and consumer care and animal health products, we work with customers and operate in more than 140 countries to deliver innovative health solutions. We also demonstrate our commitment to increasing access to healthcare through far-reaching policies, programs and partnerships. For more information, visit [www.merck.com](http://www.merck.com).

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