

# In Other News: Renewed Assault on Malaria Will Save Millions

By Chris Mallinos



New anti-malarial drugs registered for use in Brazil, pictured on April 17, 2008. New anti-malarial drugs offer hope for reducing the incidence of malaria worldwide. (Vanderlei Almeida/AFP/Getty Images)



After years of death and despair, opportunity has finally begun knocking at the door of malaria eradication.

A report released in September by the World Health Organization (WHO) showed promising signs of progress in the fight against the disease that kills one million people every year.

It found that, between 2000 and 2006, more than 25 countries managed to cut their malaria death totals in half. What's more, the total number of infections around the world now stands at 247 million, down from the 350-500 million estimated in WHO's 2005 report.

These drops are credited to what the report calls "a renewed assault on malaria," which includes ever-more effective and affordable anti-malaria pills as well as a greater distribution of insecticide-laced bed nets to repel mosquitoes that carry the disease.

This is good news indeed, especially since malaria often doesn't get the attention it deserves.

But the worst thing the world can do now is to stop and celebrate. That's because these steps forward are just the beginning of a long road ahead. Malaria still kills some 3000 people every day in sub-Saharan Africa alone, mostly children under five.

Nearly half the world's population lives in areas where malaria is a constant threat. Yet despite recent improvements, far too few people have access to life-saving medicine and only 2 per cent of African children sleep under a bed net.

Aside from the overwhelming human toll, the disease also wreaks havoc on economies and on social stability. The UN says that in Africa, where most cases occur, malaria costs \$12 billion a year in lost GDP. Add to that the resulting poverty and increased health care costs and it becomes clear that the disease hurts far more than just those infected.

So if the battle against malaria is going to be won, we must maintain and even step up our “renewed assault.”

There’s little doubt that malaria can be completely eradicated. As the latest statistics prove, we have the knowledge and tools to defeat the disease. All that remains is to stir up enough political will.

Any global leader with enough compassion and foresight will find a wonderful opportunity to make a real difference in the world by investing in malaria treatment and prevention.

Such an investment wouldn’t even cost that much. According to the UN, just \$2 billion a year is needed to halve the global impact of malaria by 2010. Even simple bed nets, which help drastically reduce the number of cases, cost less than \$10 a piece to produce and ship.

Yet right now the world spends a mere \$600 million on the disease.

When you consider that makeup and perfume is a \$33 billion industry, or that Europeans and Americans spend just under \$20 billion a year on pet food, \$2 billion a year for malaria prevention is a tiny investment with a huge return.

Even in the U.S., where dire economic turmoil makes increased funding for international development very unlikely, whoever wins the upcoming election will find a straightforward and affordable way to begin restoring America’s image abroad by taking the lead on malaria eradication.

At around the same time that the WHO released its 2008 malaria report, Bill and Melinda Gates were co-hosting the UN Malaria Summit, which brought together politicians, celebrities and activists to discuss ways to tackle the disease.

What resulted from the meeting was the Global Malaria Action Plan, step-by-step instructions on how the world can improve distribution of life-saving drugs and bed nets, while also increasing funding for malaria research.

The plan estimates that more than four million lives can be saved by 2015.

This means time is of the essence. If the world can build upon its small successes, malaria can go the way of smallpox, which was eradicated in 1977. That accomplishment is heralded as one of the greatest achievements of modern medicine.

But if global attention wavers, millions of men, women and children will continue to suffer and die, not just at the hands of tiny mosquitoes, but also as a result of our indifference.