

AFRICA | ON THE BRINK: GUINEA WORM | A LONG CRUSADE

Dose of Tenacity Wears Down a Horrific Disease

By DONALD G. MCNEIL JR. MARCH 26, 2006

OGI, Nigeria - Whatever secrets the turgid brown depths of the Sacred Pond of Ogi may keep, there is one they betray quite easily: why it is so infuriatingly hard to wipe even one disease off the face of the earth.

Ogi is one of the last areas of Nigeria infested with Guinea worm, a plague so ancient that it is found in Egyptian mummies and is thought to be the "fiery serpent" described in the Old Testament as torturing the Israelites in the desert.

For untold generations here, yardlong, spaghetti-thin worms erupted from the legs or feet -- or even eye sockets -- of victims, forcing their way out by exuding acid under the skin until it bubbled and burst. The searing pain drove them to plunge the blisters into the nearest pool of water, whereupon the worm would squirt out a milky cloud of larvae, starting the cycle anew.

"The pain is like if you stab somebody," said Hyacinth Igelle, a farmer with a worm coming out of a hand so swollen and tender that he could not hold a hoe. He indicated how the pain moved slowly up his arm. "It is like fire -- it comes late, but you feel it even unto your heart."

Now, thanks to a relentless 20-year campaign led by former President Jimmy Carter, Guinea worm is poised to become the first disease since smallpox to be pushed into oblivion. Fewer than 12,000 cases were found last year, down from 3 million in 1986.

Mr. Carter persuaded world leaders, philanthropists and companies to care about an obscure and revolting disease and help him fight it. His foundation mobilized volunteers in tens of thousands of villages to treat the drinking water the worms live in.

But the eradication effort has already taken a decade longer than expected. And sometimes, when the world beyond their farthest sorghum field or camel-grazing spot takes an interest in them, the villagers fight the message.

Guinea worm's Latin name is dracunculiasis, or "affliction with little dragons," but in Africa it is often called empty granary because of its tendency to erupt at harvest time, rendering farmers unable to work. It ought to be almost ridiculously easy to wipe out, because it has a complex life cycle in which humans, worms, fleas and shallow ponds each must play their parts perfectly. Any missing link disrupts the chain of transmission.

Wells can be drilled to prevent the afflicted from plunging their limbs into the village's drinking water. Or local water sources can be treated with a mild pesticide that kills the fleas that swallow the worm larvae and are, in turn, swallowed by the humans. Or every family can faithfully pour its water through a filter cloth each day, or drink through filtering straws. With unremitting effort, experts at the Carter Center now estimate, purging the last nine African countries of the disease could take five more years. Dr. Ernesto Ruiz-Tiben, technical director of its campaign, says he is sure that, at long last, victory is in sight.