



international  
**trachoma**  
initiative

**STRICT EMBARGO: 1:00 p.m. EST, Tuesday Nov. 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003**

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**‘REMARKABLE RESULTS’ MADE IN EFFORT TO ELIMINATE  
BLINDING TRACHOMA IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD**

**Pfizer commits to increase treatments from current eight million to 135  
million over next five years, a 15-fold expansion**

**In Morocco, 90 Percent Disease Reduction Among Children;  
Goal to Eliminate Trachoma by End of 2005 Now Within Reach**

**It is now realistic to hope for something that was unimaginable just a few years ago**

*The International Trachoma Initiative and Pfizer will hold a press conference in Room 226 of the United Nations New York headquarters on November 11 at 12:45 pm. All journalists are invited, but those without UN press credentials must apply for credentials by calling +1-212-963-6934. Individual interviews with ITI and Pfizer representatives are also available. Call +1-703-820-2244 to schedule time. VNRs and b-rolls are available for television producers, graphics and background materials are available for all at [http://www.hoffmanpr.com/Press\\_Releases/press\\_releases.html](http://www.hoffmanpr.com/Press_Releases/press_releases.html).*

New York, NY, (November 11, 2003) – The global effort to eliminate a blinding eye infection common in the developing world is showing “dramatic results,” including a reduction in acute infections in children by as much as 50 percent in some program areas.

The goal of completely eliminating blinding trachoma, the world’s leading cause of preventable blindness, “now seems possible” by 2020, a date set by the World Health Organization (WHO), according to results published in the November issue of *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*. Trachoma has been a public health plague since ancient times and is currently prevalent in the poorest parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, where clean water and sanitation are scarce.

The results focus on the International Trachoma Initiative (ITI), which is now marking its fifth anniversary and expanding its fight against the disease. Under the direction of the ITI – a partnership among Pfizer, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, national governments and non-governmental

organizations – trachoma programs are now under way in nine countries, including Morocco, Ghana, Mali, Tanzania, Vietnam, Sudan, Niger, Nepal and Ethiopia.

“We are winning the fight against blindness from trachoma because we have an extraordinary strategy and effective partnerships in our program countries,” said Dr. Jacob Kumaresan, president of the ITI. “Building on the momentum of our achievements to date, we are broadening the scope of the trachoma programs already in place and will launch at least 10 new country programs.”

As part of the expansion, Pfizer expects to donate about 135 million more treatments of Zithromax®, a well-known antibiotic that is highly effective against trachoma, in addition to the eight million treatments administered over the last five years – a 15-fold expansion. Also in the last five years, more than 70,000 surgeries have been performed to halt corneal damage and prevent blindness.

“Trachoma has been one of humankind’s most challenging public health problems for centuries,” said Hank McKinnell, chairman and chief executive officer of Pfizer. “Based on the progress to date, it is now realistic to hope for something that was unimaginable just a few years ago, that within the next 20 years we will ensure that no one anywhere in the world is ever blinded by trachoma again.”

In Morocco, the first country to implement an ITI trachoma elimination strategy, there has been a 90 percent reduction in the prevalence of active trachoma infection among children under ten since 1997. Morocco expects to eliminate blinding trachoma entirely by the end of 2005.

Trachoma is a chronic, contagious infection that over time results in in-turned eyelashes, which then scratch and scar the cornea, leading to blindness if not treated. Trachoma is endemic in 48 countries, with an estimated 146 million infected. Women are two to three times more likely than men to be infected by trachoma and because the disease causes blindness in the most productive years of a person’s life, it can ruin the economic well-being of entire families and communities.

One expert study has estimated that the economies of developing countries lose \$2.9 billion in productivity per year to blindness caused by trachoma.

Through the ITI, Pfizer donates Zithromax to countries that implement the “SAFE” strategy, which WHO recommends as the most effective way to treat trachoma. SAFE includes these components:

surgery for late-stage disease, antibiotics for active infection, improved facial hygiene and environmental change, such as improved access to clean water and sanitation.

Zithromax has played a key role in the success of trachoma control efforts. As an oral medication, Zithromax is easier to administer than tetracycline eye ointment, which was previously the standard treatment for trachoma. Clinical tests confirmed by the ITI's experience in the field show that a single oral dose of Zithromax is as effective as tetracycline ointment applied continuously twice daily for 6-10 weeks – a difficult course of treatment to maintain in areas where the disease is most often found.

The ITI is the only organization dedicated solely to the elimination of blinding trachoma in the world. In seeking to eliminate blinding trachoma, the ITI is carrying out a mandate established by the World Health Organization's Alliance for Global Elimination of Trachoma by 2020 in 1997.

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