

PRESS RELEASE

Innovative tools to tackle malaria and other vector-borne diseases urgently needed

Madrid, 11 May 2017 – Innovative tools to tackle malaria and other vector-borne diseases are urgently needed to counter growing insecticide resistance that is undermining protective measures such as spraying homes and sleeping under mosquito nets. International health experts are meeting in Madrid this week to address the challenges posed by these diseases and explore new ways to respond to them.

Malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever, and other neglected tropical diseases are all transmitted by “vectors” such as mosquitoes, ticks, flies and fleas. Many of these diseases, including the most deadly of them, malaria, are preventable. Vector-borne diseases account for nearly one-fifth of all infectious diseases worldwide and cause more than 1 million deaths each year. “Vector control” encompasses a range of interventions to prevent malaria and other vector-borne diseases.

“Vector control tools play a vital role in the control and elimination of vector-borne diseases,” said Dr Antoni Plasència, Director General of the Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal), an institute supported by the “la Caixa” Banking Foundation, speaking at the opening of the two-day conference on innovation in vector control tools. “Future progress against these diseases is threatened due to growing insecticide resistance, outdoor and residual disease transmission. Research and development is therefore critical in finding new solutions to overcome these challenges, and this is one of our priorities at ISGlobal.”

Unitaid, which is organizing the conference in partnership with ISGlobal, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Fundación Ramón Areces, is today launching a call to solicit proposals for interventions that will accelerate the development of new vector control tools to prevent malaria. Tools that can address other vector-borne diseases alongside malaria are of particular interest.

Through its Calls for Proposals, Unitaid invites smart new ideas to help to alleviate diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, and supports the most promising ones with funding.

“With our Call we are hoping to spur innovative thinking and development of new tools to prevent malaria and other vector-borne diseases” said Lelio Marmora, Unitaid’s Executive Director. “Unitaid’s business model is about investing in innovation and paving the way for partners to scaleup new health products or approaches.”

Although investments in vector control research and development (R&D) have produced new products, several barriers are holding up the introduction and scale-up of these products. These include the cost and complexity of late-stage R&D, the need to secure a good price for products to ensure they are profitable but also affordable, and the difficulties of adopting new tools into national programmes.

WHO has recently called for an accelerated scale-up of efforts to prevent malaria and save lives. In sub-Saharan Africa - which is home to 90 percent of malaria cases - more than 663 million cases have been averted since 2001 in large part due to insecticide-treated nets.

“We know that malaria prevention works. The challenge now is to close the prevention gap,” said Dr Pedro Alonso, Director of WHO’s Global Malaria Programme, speaking at the conference. “Innovation is essential to develop new diagnostics, treatments and prevention tools, including new vector control tools, but the reality is that many people at risk of malaria in Africa do not even have access to existing malaria prevention tools and treatments.

The WHO-recommended malaria prevention package includes insecticide-treated nets, spraying indoor walls of homes with insecticides, and preventive medicines for those most vulnerable – pregnant women, infants and other children under five years. In 2015, an estimated 43 percent of people at risk of malaria in sub-Saharan Africa were not protected by either a treated net or indoor insecticide spraying.

QUICK FACTS

- Vector-borne diseases are illnesses caused by pathogens and parasites that are transmitted to humans through vectors such as mosquitoes, ticks, flies, sandflies and fleas.
- Each year, there are more than 1 billion cases of vector-borne diseases and over 1 million deaths globally. Many of these diseases are preventable.
- In 2015, there were 212 million cases and 429,000 deaths from malaria worldwide.
- Other vector-borne diseases such as Chagas disease, leishmaniasis and schistosomiasis affect hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

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