



Tigray project

Fighting malaria in Ethiopia

At a glance

Issue

- Combat malaria in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, a region where the disease is endemic

Objectives

- Provide malaria diagnosis, Coartem® supplies and health education to people in the Tigray region
- Transfer malaria-management skills and know-how to local communities
- Engage the company with key stakeholders (governments and NGOs)

Activities

- Health education, training, distribution of free diagnostic tests (RDTs) and Coartem, as well as disease monitoring
- Media trip to Tigray with top-tier Italian media

Results

- In just one year, 80 000 malaria patients have been diagnosed and treated, 140 000 people have received health education, and hospital admissions and case-fatality rates caused by malaria have declined in Tigray
- Successful regional disease management approach has been implemented
- Positive press coverage

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Beginning in 2005, Novartis Italy joined with external partners, including the Italian Ministry of Health, to help fight malaria in Tigray, a region in northern Ethiopia. In the first year, 80 000 patients have been diagnosed and treated.

The initiative supports a wider corporate citizenship effort by Novartis to improve access to medicines and combat malaria worldwide. In 2001, Novartis signed an agreement with the World Health Organization (WHO) to provide its leading anti-malaria treatment Coartem® at cost to governments of malaria-stricken countries.

The Tigray project is providing free diagnosis and Coartem supplies, as well as health education, to some 140 000 people in northern Ethiopia. The project has implemented a successful regional disease management approach in the Tigray area, and it has helped Novartis leverage its reputation with key stakeholders in several countries.

Malaria is endemic in Tigray. An estimated 56 percent of the people live in affected areas, while 50 percent live beyond the reach of healthcare facilities. In this region, as in most of Ethiopia, falciparum malaria – the most dangerous form – has become resistant to single stand-alone antimalarial treatments, such as chloroquine. This growing danger is the reason many countries are moving toward the use of drug combinations that include a derivative of artemisinin (a compound derived from the sweet wormwood plant, which has been used for centuries in traditional Chinese medicine).

Coartem is currently the only fixed-dose Artemisinin Combination Therapy (ACT), delivering artemether (an artemisinin derivative) with lumefantrine – now the optimal first-line treatment. The drug, which is highly effective and well-tolerated and achieves cure rates of up to 95 percent even in areas of multi-drug resistance, has been placed on the WHO list of essential medicines and pre-qualified for procurement by UN agencies.

From 2005 to 2007, Novartis Italy will allocate USD 400 000 – including free distribution of Coartem plus simple and rapid diagnostic tests, as well as implementation of infrastructures and of health educational activities – and the Italian government will contribute USD 125 000.

Encouraging results

In just one year, the strategy of combining free rapid diagnostic tests (RDTs), drugs and health education activities has yielded positive results. In total, 48 000 patients affected by malaria within 33 intervention villages have been treated, while about 32 000 individuals have been diagnosed and treated for malaria in healthcare facilities. Furthermore, hospital admissions and case-fatality rates caused by malaria have declined in Tigray.

This is largely due to a network of 81 health workers and 33 community health workers, who distributed Coartem to rural communities including villages lacking healthcare facilities and provided them with educational programs. These workers also have trained practitioners to detect malaria through diagnostic tests, correctly handle Coartem and RDTs, manage patients, collect and analyze data, perform pharmacovigilance activities and educate the population on public health issues.

A complete assessment of the project's impact on reducing morbidity, mortality and hospital admissions will be conducted in 2007.

Disease management approach

The key outcome of the project is to achieve a disease management approach, with actions focusing on four areas:

- Health education for early diagnosis, effective treatment and compliance
- Training activities to promote accurate diagnosis and early treatment of malaria with Coartem
- Distribution of free diagnostic tests (RDTs) for detecting malaria in health facilities without microscopy and optimizing treatments
- Disease monitoring through data collection and analysis

A distinctive element of the program lies in 'capacity-building,' enabling communities to receive the know-how and skills to manage malaria. According to the WHO, which provides technical assistance and monitoring through its Global Malaria Program (GMP), this 'added value' is an essential component of fighting one of the most serious diseases of the developing world.

Positive media returns

In May 2006, Novartis Italy organized a media trip to Tigray. A delegation of eight top-tier journalists (including members of Corriere della Sera, Repubblica, Sole 24 ore, RAI State TV 2, and RAI Educational) visited health centers, hospitals and villages, talked with community health workers and patients,

and met with the Ethiopian Ministry of Health. A press conference with the Tigray Health Minister marked the end of the visit. Overall, journalists were impressed by the professional management and monitoring of the project and the integrated approach among different disciplines and partners, as reflected in the extensive media coverage.

Business case

- Through the Tigray project, Novartis Italy has worked in close cooperation with a cross-section of political and medical officials as well as NGO representatives in both Italy and Ethiopia. At a time when public attention is focusing on access to medicines, it is important for the company to be recognized for its efforts to contribute to access to treatment for neglected diseases. This trust is essential to maintaining the company's 'license to operate, innovate and grow.'
- Novartis Italy also has gained a considerable pool of knowledge and experience, which can be replicated in other countries in which the group operates.

About Novartis Italy

With activities in pharmaceuticals, consumer health, generics (Sandoz) and vaccines, revenues for 2005 totaled € 1.1 million. Novartis Italy employs 3 500 associates.

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