



SUCCESS STORY

Haitian Community Leaders Fight Neglected Diseases and Inspire Change



A young girl is treated for lymphatic filariasis (LF) and soil-transmitted helminthes (STH) during a Mass Drug Administration in Haiti.

Photo: IMA World Health

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The sound of the little girl's cries woke her mother in the middle of the night in their small home located in the Haitian department of Artibonite. The girl had been complaining of chronic stomach pain and was often restless at night during the fall of 2008. When she turned to the family elders for assistance, they advised her to take the child to a local voodoo priest for an exorcism.

"In much of rural Haiti, we have more voodoo priests than we do medical professionals," said Dr. Abdel Dirény, IMA World Health who works as part of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Neglected Tropical Disease (NTD) Control Program. "Voodoo is part of the culture and is often what people turn to when they have a health problem." Fortunately, before this mother visited a voodoo priest and paid him to exorcize the demons she was told had possessed her daughter, she went to a meeting held in her community.

The meeting was held in preparation for a mass drug administration (MDA) in three of Haiti's departments coordinated by the NTD Control Program, to provide treatment for lymphatic filariasis (LF, commonly known as "elephantiasis") and soil-transmitted helminthes (STH, or intestinal worms). LF and STH are the two most common NTDs in Haiti and are caused by parasites. "At that meeting she learned the symptoms of intestinal worms, including abdominal pains and difficulty sleeping," explained Dr. Dirény. After listening to the community leader and the discussion at the meeting, the mother was convinced that worms, not demons, plagued her daughter.

"We realized we could offer medication to fight these diseases, but to be truly effective and reach as many people as possible, we needed the help of local people selected from the community to educate and change the attitudes of the population," said Dr. Dirény. "We came up with the idea of selecting local leaders from the communities where the MDAs would be [conducted]. Engaging leaders [who] people already knew and respected and would listen to when they said [that] taking these medications was important and would help has been the backbone of the success of the program. People often feel some discomfort as the parasites are being eliminated by the medication, which can discourage others who hear about the discomfort from taking it. They need to hear from leaders they already know and trust that this is normal."

Fortunately, the mother in Artibonite listened to the community leader at that meeting. She brought her daughter to the MDA held in November 2008, in the city of Grande Saline, for a dosage of albendazole and DEC. The medicine worked; the pain stopped. She began sleeping through the night and again became a happy, healthy little girl.