

# Press release: UK aid to help eliminate the world's leading infectious cause of blindness across poorest countries in the Commonwealth by 2020

Malawi has successfully eliminated trachoma. Photo credit: The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust

Millions of people across the Commonwealth will be free of blinding trachoma as the UK steps up its support to tackle this ancient and avoidable disease, the International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt will announce today.

Trachoma, a bacterial infection that can lead to permanent loss of sight, affects more than 52 million people across 21 Commonwealth countries. If left untreated, the painful disease, which is the world's main infectious cause of blindness, can cause eyelids to turn inward, or eyelashes to grow towards the eye scratching the cornea.

To help eliminate the disease, UK aid will provide additional support to 10 Commonwealth countries over the next two years, providing antibiotics to millions, surgery and education programmes to teach people how to stop the spread of this infection.

International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt said:

British research, NGOs and pharmaceutical companies have been at the forefront of the global fight to eliminate blinding trachoma that causes debilitating pain for its victims.

UK aid has already made a huge difference to vulnerable people in countries including Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda, freeing families trapped in a cycle of poverty as the disease passes from one generation to the next. In Malawi for example, four years ago eight million people were at risk of trachoma and now no-one is.

This further commitment will mean millions of people across the Commonwealth will receive vital sight-saving treatment and we will be on course to eliminate this ancient and avoidable disease.

This new package of UK support will:

- Enable our partners to map out where the disease remains in 138 districts in Tanzania, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Kenya;

- Help Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Nauru work with the World Health Organisation to confirm they have eliminated trachoma;
- Provide 76,000 people with surgery in Kenya, to prevent blindness and end the pain trachoma causes, and eliminate the disease as a public health problem by 2020; and
- Help Pakistan, Tanzania and Papua New Guinea get nearer to elimination as millions receive sight-saving treatment.

Today's support is part of the UK's £360 million commitment made in April 2017 to provide a billion treatments for people at risk of neglected tropical diseases like trachoma and guinea worm. Neglected tropical diseases affect over a billion people in the poorest and most marginalised communities in the world, stopping children going to school and parents going to work – costing developing economies billions of dollars every year in lost productivity and reducing overall global prosperity.

The International Development Secretary will highlight the results of UK aid at an event this evening organised by The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust (QEDJT) to celebrate work to eliminate trachoma across the Commonwealth.

Dr Astrid Bonfield CBE, chief executive of The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust, said:

At the Trust, thanks to support from DFID and our partners from across the Commonwealth, we have seen how the elimination of trachoma transforms lives for the better.

It is wonderful news that more citizens, communities and countries across the Commonwealth can now look forward to a future free of the scourge of this ancient, painful, blinding disease.

Through our partners, Sightsavers and the QEDJT, UK aid has made huge progress in fighting avoidable blindness. UK aid has helped to train more than 10,000 people to look for the final trachoma cases around the world. These trained specialists have provided crucial advice to those affected by the disease, helping them to get surgery and teach them on how to stop the spread of the infection itself.

Dr Caroline Harper CBE, CEO of the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind – more commonly known as Sightsavers – welcomed the announcement:

Blinding trachoma is a horribly painful disease that has devastating effects on the people it affects and their communities.

This new investment the Commonwealth 2018-20 Fund will help us make huge strides towards eliminating this ancient scourge from the Commonwealth and will also encourage other donors to step forward.

1. The International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt today announced £20 million of funding, contributing towards eliminating blinding trachoma across the Commonwealth by 2020.
2. £7 million for this programme comes from the 2018 – 2020 fund which the British government has made to create positive change in the Commonwealth, during the UK's period as chair-in-office.
3. Today's announcement is part of our effort to beat these diseases. The world is making great progress on these. In 2017 there were only 30 cases of guinea worm left globally, down from over 3 million a year in the 1980s.
4. Pharmaceutical companies have been critical to efforts controlling and preventing trachoma and other neglected tropical diseases, through their generous donation of the necessary drugs. For trachoma, Pfizer have donated more than 500 million doses of antibiotics, treating more than 100 million people in 33 countries.
5. The two year programme announced today will build on, and in some cases complete, the UK's previous efforts to eliminate blinding trachoma in 10 Commonwealth countries: Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Nauru, Kenya, Pakistan, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea, and Nigeria.
6. The programme implements SAFE strategies (surgery, antibiotics, facial cleanliness and environmental improvements), which are known to eliminate blinding trachoma, and have been endorsed by the World Health Organisation.
7. UK aid supported the Global Trachoma Mapping Project 2012-2016, the largest infectious disease survey ever undertaken that helped to pinpoint the world's trachoma-endemic areas. This project collected data from 2.6 million people in 29 countries using Android smartphones.