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AUGUST 1, 2010

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- Perspective
- Entertainment
- Detour
- Columns
- Last Word
- Health

Home > Business > Full Story

▶ Outlook: Deworm the World comes to India

By Sushma Ramachandran

Being infected with worms has rarely been considered a life-threatening disease. The fact is that worm infestation can not only seriously impair health of children, it can in the long run affect their aim of having a gainful livelihood.

Recognising the serious impact of parasitic worms on childrens' health all over the world, a global non-profit institution called Deworm the World has been created by the Young Global Leaders group of the World Economic Forum.

This unique initiative has now come to India. DtW's Regional Director for South Asia, Purna Makkar says the aim is improve the nutritional and health levels of schoolgoing children at a cost of only Rs. 25 per child per year. DtW has so far launched operations in three states – Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Delhi.

Ms. Makkar says DtW began its operations in the African continent in 2008 and has had tremendous success in Nigeria and Kenya. The statistics are startling. Over 400 million schoolgoing children all over the world are infected by parasitic worms affecting their health, nutrition and cognitive development.

As they grow older, these infections affect there academic growth and ability to earn a livelihood. Simply giving them one tablet of deworming medicine once or twice a year can turn the tide for these children. And she says the impact has been dramatic in Kenya and Nigeria where absenteeism has been reduced to a large extent in regions where there is a high incidence of worm infestation.

Interestingly, this is one non-profit that is keen to disappear from each project as soon as possible. DtW, according to Ms. Makkar, wants to integrate the deworming programme into the official government health policies in whichever country it is operating in. In India, it has begun the process in Andhra Pradesh where the project began with the blessing of the late Chief Minister Y.S. Rajashekhara Reddy.

Poignantly, DtW scientists say YSR was due to inaugurate the programme just the day before he died tragically in a helicopter crash. Be that as it may, the deworming programme has been carried out successfully in six districts of the state. It was launched by the A. P. government with technical and operational support by Deworm the World in September and October 2009. As many as two million children in 21000 government schools were dewormed through the school system with guidance of experts from the state's School Health Coordination Committee.

Not only that, the A.P. government is now including deworming as part of its official health policy.

This is what DtW terms as success as this means that the role of the non-profit will gradually wither away as the state government implements the programmes through its own infrastructure.

Incidentally, globally the deworming programme is implemented through both the health and education systems of the state. The deworming medicine is actually given to schoolgoing children by teachers under the supervision of health officials. The school-based deworming system has been found to be the most effective in implementing this scheme.

The next state to be covered according to DtW officials is Bihar where scientific studies on the prevalence of worm infestation are being carried out in the Patna division. Currently plans are on to launch the school based deworming programme within a month or two in six districts .

Current estimates are that there are 21 million children in Bihar and the target group is the 18 million who attend school. Simultaneously, prevalence studies are set to be launched in Delhi where the All India Institute of Medical Studies (AIIMS) has been involved in the scientific

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analysis process.

Scientists who have worked on the deworming programme in Africa say the impact of this on children is a long term one. Children, especially girls who suffer serious health setbacks owing to worm infestation, find there is a dramatic improvement in their overall well being as well as academic performance.

Which in turns allows them to complete their education and go on to find well –paying jobs. They say the rewards of this programme will be seen only over the next ten years and will lead to radical improvements in the overall health of an entire population.

Ms. Makkar says deworming is gradually becoming a critical aspect of global health strategies. The World Health Organisation has set a target of deworming 75 per cent of children at risk by 2010, but by 2006 only ten per cent had been treated. For less than Rs. 25 per child per year, the mass school based deworming programme is considered a safe, simple, inexpensive and highly effective intervention.

One can only look forward to a gradual expansion of this programme all over the country to help children from the ages of six to 14 years improve overall health and nutritional levels.

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