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UK aid cuts will result in the destruction of millions of doses of life-saving drugs | [Telegraph.co.uk](https://www.telegraph.co.uk) » | 14 June 2021 | By Filou

## UK aid cuts will result in the destruction of millions of doses of life-saving drugs

The situation is particularly dire for drugs with shorter shelf lives

Almost 200 million doses of medicine for the treatment of neglected diseases in Africa are at risk of expiring because of foreign aid budget cuts, the Telegraph has learnt.

Many of the drugs which will be destroyed would have been used to help children fight conditions such as intestinal worms which stunt their development and disrupt their education.

The drugs were donated by their manufacturers as part of a huge programme to help the world's poorest. Under the partnership, pharmaceutical companies manufacture and ship the drugs for free whilst donors fund their distribution in-country.

But following the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)'s announcement in April that it would withdraw £150 million of funding to Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs), recipient countries now have stockpiles of medicines they are unable to distribute.

The situation is particularly dire for drugs with a shorter shelf life such as praziquantel, a drug manufactured by Merck and used for the prevention and treatment of bilharzia, a debilitating condition that affects the urinary and intestinal system.

"The timing [of the cuts] and the lack of notice has really shocked us and completely thrown us off," Johannes Waltz, head of the bilharzia programme at Merck, told the Telegraph. "65 per cent of our [drug donation] was supported by FCDO."

As things stand, 184 million tablets of praziquantel with an expiry date of 2021 or 2022 are now sitting in warehouses across 25 countries in Africa. Mebendazole, a deworming drug manufactured by Johnson & Johnson, is also affected: 11.3 million doses expire in 2021 and are currently languishing in storage in Uganda.

Thoko Elphick-Pooley, executive director at Uniting to Combat NTDs, the coalition leading NTD efforts globally, told The Telegraph that the timing of the budget cuts was devastating because the bulk of drug distribution usually happens in the latter months of the year, after the rainy season. "The UK government didn't warn the drug companies, and we are now reeling from the fall-out," she said.

The problem is compounded by the pandemic: many countries were unable to distribute all their drugs last year and therefore had a surplus they planned to distribute this year. In total, the World Health Organization in Africa estimates that there are now 615 million tablets of various NTD drugs waiting to be distributed in 23 countries, and whilst many don't expire until 2023 or 2024, it won't be any consolation for those in need of treatment.

Elphick-Pooley said there was now a global search to plug the £150 million FCDO shortfall and ensure drugs weren't wasted. In Zambia for instance, partners are scrambling to administer 4 million doses of praziquantel that expire at the end of the month. The drugs could treat 1.7 million children.

With just three weeks to go and a spike in Covid-19 infections, it's a Herculean task. "Most partners will not be able to provide funding at such notice," Elphick-Pooley said. "Some medicine will expire and be destroyed, it's inevitable."



She added that the FCDO had been one of the largest donors in NTDs, financing about a third of all drug distribution. Their sudden departure is therefore a huge financial blow, but it also threatens to jeopardise the partnership with pharmaceutical companies, the cornerstone of the NTD programme.

"Every other global health initiative such as The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria has to buy their commodities: we already have them," she said. "We calculate that every £1 of donor funding leverages £26 of donated drugs. This is a really good return for tax payers, it's really good value at times of financial constraints."

Drug manufacturing however cannot just switch off overnight. Waltz said that the FCDO cuts will have widespread repercussions on their activities: Merck dedicates 50 per cent of the capacity of its plant in Mexico to the production of praziquantel. The company plans its manufacturing schedules a year in advance, including buying the Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient (API) for the drug.

"We're having to manage production schedule disruptions for the rest of the year because we cannot deliver drugs as planned. But we are also finding ourselves in a situation where the economics of the Mexico plant are being thrown into disarray because of a potential scale down in demand," he explained.

"We feel incredibly let down because we have committed to donating praziquantel until the elimination of bilharzia. It's not a three- to five-year commitment and it's a sizeable investment vis-à-vis the size of the company," he went on. "But when we have seismic shock of this kind, when a big partner pulls back, it doesn't instil confidence."

The budget cuts are all the more surprising because NTDs were at the very top of the UK's aid agenda until recently: Prime Minister Boris Johnson featured in a special video released on World NTD Day on 30 January this year in which he said that "the UK fully supports the ambition to protect everyone from the pain, disfigurement and poverty caused by NTDs."

At the G7 meeting, the Prime Minister also announced the UK's ambition to help educate every child in the world. Yet bilharzia and intestinal worms overwhelmingly affect children and girls and are a major cause of absenteeism in school. Most childhood preventive treatments for NTDs are also provided in schools.

There is evidence too that deworming schoolchildren has a long-lasting impact on life attainment. Economics Nobel Laureate Michael Kremer published the results of a 20-year longitudinal study last year in which he and his fellow researchers found that individuals in Kenya who had received an additional two or three years of deworming as children enjoyed higher standards of living as adults, even 20 years down the line.

"The government could have included deworming programmes as a key contribution to education" says Elphick-Pooley. "If they want to promote access to education, they should look at the barriers preventing them from accessing and poor health linked to intestinal worms is a major contributor. Cutting support for deworming was short-sighted."

