

Mapping the world of worm infections

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Image: A pair of *Schistosoma haematobium* blood worms. Credit: Wellcome Images

‘This Wormy World’, a series of maps showing the distribution and prevalence of worm infections across each country in Africa, launches today. The maps form the first part of the Global Atlas of Helminth Infections, providing a unique, open-access resource essential for planning and implementing de-worming programmes.

More than 400 million children worldwide are thought to be infected with worms (helminths) - 90 million of these are in Africa alone. Worms damage children's health and can affect their nutrition as well as educational achievement. Infections are most prevalent in poor communities where there is inadequate sanitation. The most common worm infections are soil-transmitted helminths, such as roundworm, whipworm and hookworm, and schistosomiasis.

Launched today at the 12th International Congress of Parasitology in Melbourne, Australia,

'This Wormy World' identifies which areas in a country most urgently require mass treatment to control infection and predicts the risk of infection in areas where data is lacking. The Global Atlas of Helminth Infections has been produced by an international collaboration led by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Partnership for Child Development at Imperial College London. The group has been gathering survey data for a decade to describe the distribution and prevalence of worm infection.

The project was set up by Dr Simon Brooker, a Wellcome Trust Research Career Development Fellow from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK, and the KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme, Kenya.

"Worm control is like a journey," explains Dr Brooker. "The extent and location of the problem need to be mapped out in order to get treatment to where it is needed most. Until recently, much worm control has been a journey without reliable maps."

Worms can be controlled with safe, cheap and single-dose drugs, and treatment is most effective with improvements in sanitation and health education. Until now, the information that policy makers and public health professionals need to plan their strategies has not been easily accessible. This has meant that scarce resources have often been wasted because de-worming programmes are targeted at the wrong communities. 'This Wormy World' brings together all the available information in one standardised, geo-referenced database.

"Our aim with the atlas is to provide up-to-date, reliable maps for those involved in practical control, especially in Africa where information is lacking," says Dr Brooker.

The resource has been welcomed by Dr Narcis Kabatereine, head of

Neglected Tropical Disease Control Programme, Ugandan Ministry of Health.

"Around one quarter of the Ugandan population is at risk of worm infections. The atlas shows in great detail the communities that are most and least affected. Therefore, targeting our de-worming programmes accurately could make a dramatic difference to the health and education of adults and children in our country."

The atlas initially focuses on infections in Africa, where the burden of worms and the need for reliable maps is greatest. The group plans to produce similar maps for all other countries in the world by the end of 2010. The longer-term goal is to produce a global atlas of all neglected tropical diseases, including lymphatic filariasis and river blindness and work is already underway to develop a Global Atlas of Trachoma, in collaboration with the International Trachoma Initiative.

Provided by Wellcome Trust

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