

# Guinea worm disease: the final push to eradication

On Tuesday March 21, 2018, the Minister of Health of South Sudan, Dr Riek Gai Kok, announced at the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, USA that South Sudan has interrupted the transmission of Guinea worm disease in the world's youngest nation – it has gone for 15 consecutive months with zero reporting. Despite the ongoing conflict, this is great news for the global efforts towards the eradication of this debilitating disease <sup>[1]</sup>.

According to the WHO, as of 31 December 2015, “196 countries, territories, and areas have been certified free of Guinea worm transmission. Nine countries remain to be certified, of which two countries (Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo) have no recent history of the disease. The six other countries are either endemic (Chad, Ethiopia, Mali and South Sudan) or in the precertification phase (Kenya and Sudan)” <sup>[2]</sup>.

Guinea worm disease is caused by the parasitic worm *Dracunculus medinensis* or “Guinea worm”. This worm is the largest of the tissue parasites affecting humans <sup>[2]</sup>.

In 2006, South Sudan instituted the Guinea worm surveillance system to <sup>[3]</sup>:

- Estimate the magnitude of Guinea worm disease in the population at risk, and
- Detect, monitor and contain the cases.

The establishment of this community-based surveillance system became the core of the control efforts for Guinea worm eradication in South Sudan, in partnership with the WHO and the Carter Center <sup>[3]</sup>.

As of December 2017, a total of 30 human cases were reported globally. The 30 cases were reported from 20 villages: 15 cases from 14 villages in Chad and 15 cases from 6 villages in Ethiopia. 817 dogs infected with *Dracunculus medinensis* from Chad as well as 4 infections in baboons and 11 infections in dogs from Ethiopia were reported for the same period <sup>[2]</sup>.

The world is getting closer to eradicating Guinea worm disease, which will join the only other disease to be eradicated in the world – smallpox.

Although South Sudan cannot sleep on its laurels for now as it enters the pre-certification phase, the news that it has interrupted the transmission is one that must be applauded. Thanks to the relentless work of the hundreds of health workers on the ground, and the support of the global community.

## References

1. The Carter Center, Press Release - South Sudan Stops Transmission of Guinea Worm Disease, Carter Center, <https://bit.ly/2puFI10> (Accessed March 22, 2018)
2. WHO, 2018. Dracunculiasis eradication – World Health Organization, 2018 <https://bit.ly/2Gj8Vts> (accessed March 22, 2018)
3. Lado M, Mackoy S, Steve B, Rumunu J. Evaluation of community-based surveillance for Guinea worm, South Sudan. SSMJ 2006; 5(3):72-74

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Filters for drinking water in Guinea worm areas (Source: Southern Sudan Guinea Worm Mid-year 2006 report. Mounir et al, 2006)

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