Lions, Partners Provide Trachoma Treatments to 10 Million in Ethiopia

BAHIR DAR, AMHARA REGION, ETHIOPIA, November 2, 2010 – Today a group of Lions led by Lions Clubs International President Sid L. Scruggs III joined with partners to launch MalTra, a week-long combined treatment campaign aimed at controlling both malaria and trachoma. The antibiotic, Zithromax®, donated by program partner Pfizer Inc, is a critical part of Lions and partners’ strategy in the fight against the blinding disease in underdeveloped, rural areas.

“As Lions, we are passionate about eliminating preventable blindness, and through SightFirst we dream to see and end of this debilitating disease,” said Scruggs. “Strong partnerships are essential to successfully tackling public health problems at this magnitude and the strong partnership among Lions, The Carter Center, the Amhara Regional Health Bureau, the International Trachoma Initiative and Pfizer is invaluable.”

During the first MalTra week in November 2008, 4.8 million people were treated. Since then, the campaign has been conducted every six months, treating more people and alternating between east and west Amhara. This is the fifth annual MalTra week event. Lions have helped in mobilizing more than 15,000 community volunteers to ensure more than 10 million people in more than 4,500 villages receive twice-annually the drug that will help prevent trachoma as well as protect them against other common infections. At the same time, Lions and partners distributed bed nets to protect against malaria-carrying mosquito bites and will also provide community education on ways to prevent both trachoma and malaria.

President Scruggs and his wife Judy, Past President Jim Ervin and his wife Sharon, Lions of Ethiopia and Lions Clubs International Foundation staff participated in administering the first dose and launching the week-long initiative. Representatives from The Carter Center, the national trachoma program, government of Ethiopia, including the national president and state presidents, the International Trachoma Initiative and Pfizer joined the celebration.

Bahir Dar is located in the most trachoma-endemic area of the country. Together with the Amhara Regional Health Bureau, the international coalition is working to eliminate trachoma as a source of blindness from the region by 2015.

“This campaign is of great significance to us as it targets trachoma and malaria, two major health problems of our communities in Amhara region at an unprecedented scale” said H.E. Ato Ayalew Gobezie, president of the regional state.

A disease caused by bacterial infection, trachoma is the leading cause of preventable blindness worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), trachoma affects about 84 million people, of whom about 8 million are visually impaired and have lost their sight. Another 500 million are at risk worldwide. It is estimated that there are 1 million Ethiopians suffering from severe trachoma who are at risk of immediate blindness, 600,000 of whom live in Amhara.
“We shouldn’t allow malaria and trachoma to prey on Ethiopian people, destroying lives and jeopardizing the country’s future,” said Dr. John B. Hardman, CEO and president of The Carter Center. “We should do everything possible to support the Ministry of Health scale-up interventions to assist all the people of Ethiopia so that they can realize their full potential free from these devastating diseases.”

Trachoma control is based on the WHO integrated strategy known as SAFE – Surgery, Antibiotics, Facial cleanliness, and Environmental improvement. It is Ethiopia’s goal to eliminate trachoma from Amhara by 2012 for the entire population at risk, around 18 million people. Antibiotics are necessary to reducing trachoma in addition to improved sanitation and hand and face washing.

LCIF has helped distributed more than 42 million doses of Zithromax to help fight trachoma. This, the fifth MalTra campaign, will be the first time when more than half the people in the region will be treated at once. It will also see the administration of the 225-millionth dose of the antibiotic Zithromax®, donated by Pfizer Inc through the International Trachoma Initiative (ITI) globally. Ethiopia has received 32 percent of the global donation of Zithromax® since the program’s inception, representing an approximate value of US$1.6 billion.

“We are delighted to be part of such an inspiring collaboration and model public health campaign - the latest in our ongoing commitment to eliminate blinding trachoma by 2020," said Dr Freda Lewis-Hall, Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer, Pfizer Inc. “Like all of the health programs Pfizer is involved in across this region, it’s the strength of the partnership between the organizations and health professionals involved that makes large scale events such as MalTra week possible.”

LCIF has been involved with blindness prevention and treatment for 20 years through their SightFirst program. In addition to educating communities on sight diseases and helping to distribute azithromycin to fight trachoma, Lions in Ethiopia have organized and supported tens of thousands of cataract operations, training of ophthalmic nurses and surgeons, and strengthening of eye care centers in rural and underserved areas.

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About Lions Clubs International Foundation

Lions Clubs International Foundation is the charitable arm of Lions Clubs International, the largest service club organization in the world with 1.35 million members in 206 geographic areas and countries. LCIF has been ranked the number one non-governmental organization in a Financial Times study. Since the beginning of the SightFirst program in 1990, Lions have restored sight to 7.6 million people with cataracts, prevented serious vision loss in 30 million
people, and improved eye care services for hundreds of millions of people. LCIF has raised more than US$343 million in SightFirst grants and projects. For more information, visit lcif.org.

About The Carter Center

A not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, The Carter Center has helped to improve life for people in more than 70 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; improving mental health care; and teaching farmers in developing nations to increase crop production. The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide. Please visit cartercenter.org to learn more about The Carter Center. Media contact: Emily Staub, Associate Director, Office of Public information +1-404-420-5126

About The International Trachoma Initiative (ITI)

The International Trachoma Initiative (ITI) is a non-governmental organization working to prevent, treat and ultimately eliminate blinding trachoma. With programs in 19 countries in Africa and Asia, ITI is a major proponent and facilitator of the SAFE strategy to prevent and eliminate trachoma through Surgery, Antibiotics, Facial cleanliness and Environmental improvement. ITI was created through a public-private partnership of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and Pfizer Inc, and is now a program of the Task Force for Global Health. ITI collaborates with international agencies, governmental, and non-governmental organizations to build targeted support—including Zithromax® donated by Pfizer—for expanded implementation of the SAFE strategy, operational research and program evaluation, education and advocacy. To learn more visit www.trachoma.org. Media contact: Elizabeth Kurylo, ITI Communications Manager, +1-404-592-1420

About Pfizer Inc.: Working together for a healthier world™

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