

PRESS RELEASE

eWHORM Project Launched to Eliminate Worm Infections in Sub-Saharan Africa is coordinated by the University Hospital Bonn

African and European partners join forces to enable the World Health Organisation's (WHO) "Road Map for Neglected Tropical Diseases" (NTDs) and reduce the burden of disease associated with worm infections

7 April 2023 – Worm infections (helminthiasis) affect around 1.5 billion people worldwide, making them one of the most prevalent infections in humans. Parasitic worms (helminths) are often transmitted through insect bites or contaminated soil in areas with limited access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare. These infections can cause chronic and debilitating health problems, such as lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis (river blindness), loiasis (African eye worm), mansoniellosis, and trichuriasis (whipworm infection).

To combat various soil-transmitted helminths (STH) and filarial worms, a new multidisciplinary consortium of research institutes, universities and not-for-profit organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and Europe, coordinated by the University Hospital Bonn (UKB) in Germany, will work together to establish a new adaptive clinical trial platform and improve the clinical research infrastructure in several SSA countries. While each partner will bring unique know-how and complementary experience to achieve the project's objectives, strong representation from the Global South will drive eWHORM activities. eWHORM will be funded with EUR 7.9 million from the European Union's European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP3) programme and additional EUR 3.4 million from the Swiss Government over the next five years.

Achieving the ambitious WHO Road Map goals

Despite significant progress in preventing and controlling helminthiasis, many existing drugs have proven problematic in terms of efficacy, treatment duration, and safety. In addition, the chronic underinvestment in healthcare in developing countries has led to poor infrastructure and inadequately trained technical staff.

The eWHORM project aims to address these issues by further developing and testing more efficacious and safe treatment options that act across different helminth species. The project will also train healthcare professionals to enable the diagnosis of multiple diseases in four

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endemic countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Gabonese Republic, the Republic of Cameroon, and the United Republic of Tanzania.

This major leap will help to achieve two pressing WHO objectives: (1) eliminating filarial and STH infections and (2) building capacity in endemic countries.

Responding to persisting and future health challenges

Establishing a robust and equitable clinical research infrastructure is crucial to sustaining the progress that will be brought about by eWHORM. To this end, project partners will promote research network building, knowledge exchange, skill sharing, and gender equality awareness. Early career scientists in SSA will be supported through a Master's and PhD programme, mentorship programme, and dedicated webinars on all aspects of clinical trial conduct and research. This will, in turn, increase effectiveness and preparedness for both current and future health crises and ensure equitable access to treatment, care, and support for all patients.

Cutting-edge clinical trial to end multiple neglected tropical diseases

The broad-spectrum helminth-killing (pan-nematode anthelmintic) drug oxfendazole (OXF) is used since several decades in the veterinary field to treat multiple species of helminths safely and effectively. In the recent drug development initiative "Helminth Elimination Platform" (HELP), a field-applicable formulation of the cost-effective and easy-to-manufacture drug OXF was developed and a bioavailability study was performed in humans. Several partners, who worked towards a superior, pan-nematode anthelmintic in HELP, are now continuing their ground-breaking research in eWHORM.

"Our mission in eWHORM is to assess the efficacy of OXF for simultaneous evaluation against onchocerciasis, loiasis, mansonellosis, and trichuriasis. To do this, we plan to set up a state-of-the-art adaptive basket trial that can test OXF against multiple diseases at once. This will help us to quickly find out if OXF works and get it to patients faster," says project coordinator Marc Hübner, professor of translational microbiology at the Institute for Medical Microbiology, Immunology and Parasitology (IMMIP) at the University Hospital Bonn.

"The Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi) and Dr. Sabine Specht, Head of Filarial Disease at DNDi, have a long-standing track record in developing and enabling access to more effective and affordable drugs for Neglected Tropical Diseases," adds Hübner.

"Together with some of the most eminent research and development partners and national stakeholders worldwide, we are looking forward to contributing to what can generate a profound change in the treatment and elimination of helminth diseases."

Next to the University of Buea, the Centre de Recherches Médicales de Lambaréné, and the Institut National de Recherche Biomédicale, the consortium includes experts from the Bernhard-Nocht-Institute for Tropical Medicine, the Medical University of Vienna, the Erasmus University Medical Center, the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute and Eurice – European Research and Project Office GmbH.

Key Facts:

Full Name: eWHORM – Enabling the WHO-Road Map 2030

Start Date: 1 April 2023

Duration: 60 months

Budget: EUR 7.9 Mio. + EUR 3.4 Mio. (Switzerland)

Coordinator: University Hospital Bonn (UKB)

Website: <https://www.ewhorm.org>

Project Partners:

Austria

- Medical University of Vienna

Democratic Republic of the Congo

- Institut National de Recherche Biomédicale

Gabonese Republic

- Centre de Recherches Médicales de Lambaréné

Germany

- University Hospital Bonn (UKB)
- Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine
- Eurice – European Research and Project Office GmbH

Netherlands

- Erasmus University Medical Center

Republic of Cameroon

- University of Buea

Switzerland

- Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (Affiliated entity)
- Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Affiliated entity)

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Visuals:



Caption: The eWHORM project to eliminate worm infections in sub-Saharan Africa is coordinated by the University Hospital Bonn.

Photo credit: eWHORM project management

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About the University Hospital Bonn: The UKB cares for about 500,000 patients per year, employs 8,800 people and has a balance sheet total of 1.5 billion euros. In addition to the more than 3,300 medical and dental students, a further 580 people are trained in numerous healthcare professions each year. The UKB is ranked first among university hospitals in NRW in the science ranking and in the Focus clinic list and has the third highest case mix index in Germany.