

Healthy Lives:

New Hope for Malaria Treatment in Uganda

Biryeri Rehema, a mother of eight living in eastern Uganda, recently faced an agonizing decision no parent should have to face — which of her children should get malaria treatment.

Her three youngest — four, six and eight years old — had come down with malaria at the same time. She applied a local herb with no result and decided to take them to a hospital that offered free treatment 60 kilometers away. But she could only raise enough money to take one child and had to choose; she chose the youngest and they set off for the hospital. The child went into convulsions during the trip. Upon arrival, the child was put on free Coartem malaria treatment which would have cost between 10,000 and 15,000 Ugandan shillings (US \$6.10-9.15) in the private sector.

However, she worried about the other two children and went back to get them. Friends and family helped her transport them to the same hospital where they received treatment.



Biryeri Rehema, a mother of eight, who nearly lost three of her children to malaria this year.

This nightmare has a happy ending, with all three children recovering from malaria after a week and a half in the hospital, but many stories do not end so well. Eastern Uganda — an ecotourism center with spectacular whitewater rafting and the source of the Nile — is also endemic with malaria: The Ministry of Health estimates it kills 320 people in Uganda every day.

But Biryeri is confident she will not find herself in this situation again. The reason for her optimism is an effort launched in September that puts a highly subsidized and repackaged version of Coartem in the private sector, including several small drug shops just a few feet away from Biryeri's house. And the prices are affordable, with the cost of four different products ranging from 200 shillings (US \$0.12) for children under three to 800 shillings (US \$0.50) for children over 12. These are prices that even Biryeri — a single mother of eight who sells bread, millet and vegetables for a living — can afford.

Dubbed the Consortium for ACT in the Private Sector Subsidy (CAPSS), the initiative was launched in the four districts of Kaliro, Kamuli, Budaka and Pallisa. It is the result of the Ministry of Health's decision in 2006 to adopt Artemisinin Combination Therapies (ACT) like Coartem as the first-line treatment for malaria.

The consortium includes the Uganda Ministry of Health (with overall responsibility), PSI (repackaging and marketing), Surgipharm, a private firm (distribution), and the Malaria Consortium (provider training). The project is funded by

the Medicine for Malaria Venture (MMV), a non-profit organization based in Switzerland that was created to discover, develop and deliver new antimalarial drugs.

This project is special because PSI is testing delivery mechanisms in a high-profile way to inform the Affordable Medicines for Malaria mechanism (previously known as the Global Subsidy for ACTs). If proven effective in Kaliro, it will be rolled out in other malaria-endemic countries in Africa.

The launch of the project was inaugurated by Prime Minister Apollo Nsubambi, who expressed strong support for CAPSS, urging people to look out for the “ACT-with-the-leaf” logo emblazoned on all registered sales outlets. Minister of Health Dr. Stephen Malinga also attended, along with roughly 5,000 people.

PSI/Uganda is creating demand for ACT through radio, mobile film units, community and school mobilization, district-level advocacy and the ACT Cup. PSI/Uganda Community Mobilization Coordinator Rebecca Babirye is based in Kaliro to make sure those things happen.

In the first three weeks following the launch, PSI packaged and distributed more than 100,000 combined doses for all age groups — demand is strong. “PSI did a very wonderful job in terms of building awareness of ACT,” said Kaliro District Health Officer Dr. Shaban Mugerwa.

Biryeri said she was very excited when she heard that she would be able to buy ACT at shops near her home at a price that she can afford. In fact, she has already availed herself of the opportunity: One of her children recently came down with malaria and she bought ACTs easily and treated her child quickly.

“Life is precious, and I pray that the shops will not run out of this product, which has been brought nearer to me,” she said. “That is my appeal to the supplier.”