

# Talking to: Ann Aerts, Head of the Novartis Foundation

With extensive experience in public health management, having worked for the International Red Cross, among others, and as a doctor in emergency situations on the ground in Africa and Asia— Ann Aerts discusses the Novartis Foundation's new leprosy strategy.

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## Why do we need a new strategy to fight leprosy?

Aerts: The leprosy story is really one of the amazing public health success stories of the last decades – and one that we are proud to be a part of. Just imagine: this is a disease that has traumatized people since Biblical times, and as recently as thirty years ago, millions of people were still afflicted each year. Today? There are around 230,000 new patients diagnosed worldwide each year. That's a 95% reduction in a span of about 30 years.



Ann Aerts, Head of the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development

We've made unbelievable progress thanks to all the efforts from everyone involved – including Novartis providing free multidrug therapy (MDT) to all leprosy patients globally via the WHO, and the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development helping to reduce the disease's stigma, prevent disabilities and help patients reintegrate into society, among many others.

So why do we need a new strategy? While we've come so far, we haven't quite been able to finish the job. We've been stuck at this level of new patients for the past seven years and it's not going down. We can't be satisfied with 230,000 new patients diagnosed each year – zero transmission is our goal.

## What is different about the new strategy?

Aerts: We gathered a group of leading experts in Geneva last year to discuss the challenges and find new solutions. We looked at other disease elimination programs to see what was successful in the past.

The new leprosy strategy recommendation that came out of this meeting is aimed at zero transmission. We hope to get there by focusing on early diagnosis and treatment, contact tracing and prevention, and strict surveillance – all of which require improved cooperation and integration on an international scale.

We also learned that we need to focus more closely on individual patients. Because leprosy is a bacterium that is transmitted from person to person, we need to consider every patient a unique case. We can investigate his

or her contacts and offer all of them preventive therapy. It's a much more proactive, targeted way of tackling the disease.

## **What is the role of Novartis in implementing this strategy?**

Aerts: The Novartis Foundation will be working to demonstrate the feasibility and efficacy of contact tracing and preventive therapy by piloting it at sites in several countries. We can then take what we learn and apply the lessons elsewhere. Of course, we will also continue to facilitate the Novartis donation of MDT through the WHO to all leprosy patients who need it, anywhere in the world.

### **Resources:**

[The WHO explains more about how leprosy is transmitted](#)

[Find out more about our leprosy work at Novartis](#)

[Learn more about the foundation's efforts to combat leprosy](#)

[Read more about Ann Aerts](#)

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