

# Novartis Foundation joins new global partnership dedicated to accelerating leprosy eradication

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- *The Global Partnership for Zero Leprosy will coordinate action in three key areas: (1) accelerating research in new diagnostic and therapeutic tools, interventions, and strategies to interrupt leprosy transmission; (2) mobilizing technical assistance and expertise to strengthen existing national programs and accelerate translation of new evidence into action; and (3) increasing advocacy and fundraising.*

Ahead of World Leprosy Day last January 28, 2018, the Novartis Foundation joined forces with other leading leprosy groups to launch a Global Partnership for Zero Leprosy to accelerate progress towards a world without leprosy. Other members of the Global Partnership for Zero Leprosy include the International Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations (ILEP), International Association for Integration, Dignity and Economic Advancement (IDEA), as well as national leprosy programs, with support from the World Health Organization (WHO).

“Our common vision is zero leprosy. The formation of the Global Partnership for Zero Leprosy is a major step forward in fighting the disease and giving hope to patients,” said Dr. Ann Aerts, Head of the Novartis Foundation. “By combining expertise and coordinating research and funding efforts, we will be able to take advantage of new and innovative approaches to accelerate progress towards the elimination of leprosy.”

Despite the availability of effective multi-drug therapy for the last 30 years, the number of newly diagnosed leprosy patients has remained above 200,000 per year for the last decade, including thousands of children. This is due to barriers such as inadequate resources and stigma, which make diagnosing and treating leprosy difficult and allow the disease to continue to spread. However, scientific innovation is changing the way we approach leprosy. Instead of simply focusing on treatment, we can now implement innovative ways to interrupt transmission of the disease.

Today, around 2 million people are thought to be living with significant disabilities as a result of leprosy and many millions more are affected by leprosy-associated stigma or have undiagnosed and untreated leprosy. If left untreated, the infection can spread to others and cause progressive and permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes.

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The Novartis Foundation has been collaborating with the Philippine Department of Health (DOH) for the last six years through a public-private partnership (PPP) on leprosy control. In 2012, the DOH and the Novartis Foundation formed a Task Force that, together with other key stakeholders, drew up a comprehensive post-elimination strategy. A key output of the Task Force is the LEprosy Alert and Response Network System

(LEARNS), the country's first mobile phone-based leprosy referral system. Developed by the DOH, the Philippine Council for Health Research and Development, Metahelix, Novartis Healthcare Philippines and the Novartis Foundation, LEARNS is designed to work within existing leprosy control and monitoring initiatives of the DOH and local government units. It enables frontline healthcare providers to send images of suspected cases of leprosy to a specialist via mobile phone, helping to reduce delays in diagnosis and treatment of new leprosy patients.

From 2013 to 2014, LEARNS was successfully piloted in Iloilo province, leading to adoption of the tool in nine cities in Cebu province. To date, over 6,000 healthcare providers have been trained in LEARNS nationwide. In 2015-2016, the DOH and the Leprosy Task Force expanded LEARNS to three additional regions, using a phased approach. Two versions of LEARNS have been evaluated and will be scaled up by the National Leprosy Control Program as part of its Manual of Operations. Impressed by the success of LEARNS, Brazil, Nepal and Myanmar have expressed interest to replicate the system.



Effective treatments for leprosy are available for free worldwide, but the disease often occurs in hard-to-reach communities with limited access to healthcare. In Iloilo, the healthcare project team demonstrate the Leprosy Alert and Response Network System (Learns) – a mobile phone-based tool created by a Novartis Foundation and department of health public-private partnership. The tool enables frontline healthcare workers to send images of suspect leprosy lesions and symptoms to a specialist via SMS or an app, with feedback and referral pathways that reduce delays in diagnosis and treatment. Photograph: Alexander Kumar

### **About the Novartis Foundation**

The Novartis Foundation is a philanthropic organization pioneering innovative healthcare models that have a transformational impact on the health of the poorest populations.

The Foundation works hand-in-hand with local and global partners to catalyze scalable and sustainable healthcare models that improve access and health outcomes, and accelerate efforts to eliminate leprosy and malaria by focusing on interventions that aim to interrupt transmission.

Everything the Foundation does is grounded in evidence and innovation, and our work is a continuous cycle of

evaluation, adaptation and application. In 2015, the operational budget for the foundation was CHF 12 million and our programs reached 4.5 million people.

## About Novartis

Novartis provides innovative healthcare solutions that address the evolving needs of patients and societies. Headquartered in Basel, Switzerland, Novartis offers a diversified portfolio to best meet these needs: innovative medicines, cost-saving generic and biosimilar pharmaceuticals and eye care. Novartis has leading positions globally in each of these areas. In 2016, the Group achieved net sales of USD 48.5 billion, while R&D throughout the Group amounted to approximately USD 9.0 billion. Novartis Group companies employ approximately 118,000 full-time-equivalent associates. Novartis products are sold in approximately 155 countries around the world. For more information, please visit <http://www.novartis.com>.

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