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Novartis pledges to eliminate leprosy

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Singapore: Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development (NFSD) has launched a new leprosy strategy focused on interrupting leprosy transmission through early diagnosis and treatment, contact tracing of former patients, diagnostic tools and strict surveillance and response.

"As part of our pledge to fight neglected diseases in the developing world, Novartis and the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development are committed to going the last mile to help make leprosy history," says Mr Joseph Jimenez, CEO, Novartis."This devastating disease is curable and I am proud that our donation of multidrug therapy (MDT) has helped treat over five million patients since 2000."

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 15 million patients have been cured of leprosy since 1981, shrinking the worldwide prevalence by approximately 95 percent. Over the past eight years, however, the number of newly diagnosed leprosy patients has plateaued at around 230,000 cases per year. As experience with other disease control programs has shown, going the last mile is often the hardest. Waning knowledge means that as prevalence decreases, so do political will and funding.

"The key to eradicating smallpox was a comprehensive approach including the availability of an effective, heat stable vaccine, epidemiological surveillance, thorough research, involvement of local communities as well as strong management and commitment by the respective governments," said Professor Donald Henderson, former head of the WHO's Smallpox Eradication Campaign. "Current elimination programs can also draw on these lessons learned," he further said.Ã?Â

Moving forward, the Novartis Foundation plans to take steps to demonstrate the feasibility and efficacy of this strategy in several sites in Asia, Africa and Latin America. "Zero transmission of leprosy is achievable, but we need to be better equipped and use innovative approaches if we are to find and treat the last patients," said Ms Ann Aerts, head, Novartis Foundation. "In collaboration with our partners, we want to play a key role in curbing the incidence of leprosy."