

Malaria vaccine will reduce need for DDT

BY DAVID SUZUKI
Correspondent

Ever since Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, when the world was first warned about the environmental nightmare the widespread use of industrial pesticides such as DDT was creating, DDT has become a symbol of ecological destruc-

tion and human ignorance. Today, DDT is banned in most industrialized nations, but it is still manufactured and used in developing nations. As a result, levels of DDT and its byproducts can be found all over the world, including in human breast milk.

This has led to an interna-

tional call for the chemical to be banned outright.

But this has also created a dilemma. While nobody likes DDT, it is still used because it is a cheap and highly effective method of controlling the mosquitoes that spread one of the greatest scourges of the developing world — malaria.

Malaria is caused by a parasite that is transmitted by specific species of mosquito.

Every year, the disease infects some 500 million people and kills about two million.

The problem is most acute in Africa, where almost 90 per cent of deaths occur.

In fact, as many as 200 children die every hour from the disease.

But Canadians cannot be complacent. In 1997, more than 1,000 Canadians travelling abroad contracted the disease, resulting in several deaths.

And the World Health Organization is warning that global warming could bring malaria back to Europe and other areas currently free of the scourge.

Two years ago, a Toronto woman became the first Canadian in modern times to contract malaria from a local mosquito.

Malaria is a brutal killer, but at the same time, DDT is a highly toxic pollutant that builds up in the food chain, threatening animal species and humans — especially those living in the far north where DDT accumulates.

And even though the chemical is used only in small amounts indoors to control mosquitoes, its very existence encourages a black market for use in agriculture.

So how can we balance the need to eliminate DDT with the need to reduce incidents of malaria?

It's a perplexing problem, but steps are now being taken that could help solve the dilemma.

Last year, the World Health Organization started a rollback malaria program. The goals of the program are ambitious — to reduce new cases of malaria by one-half by 2010 and then by half again by 2015.

It won't be easy. Malaria is a tremendously complex organism, which has hindered the development of an effective vaccine.

It has also allowed the parasite to develop resistance to anti-malarial drugs such as chloroquine that have helped reduce cases in the past.

But there are now signs we may finally be on the verge of real progress in fighting the disease.

An experimental vaccine that attacks malaria at each stage of its life cycle is in development and has proved promising in lab tests on mice and rabbits.

And Australian and Canadian scientists have recently discovered some common drugs and herbicides can kill the parasite.

Geneticists say that the malarial genome should be mapped by 2001, which could yield further clues on how to fight the disease.

We can hope this new research will help us out of a difficult situation, since using DDT to reduce malaria at the same time poisons the Earth and ourselves.

We must phase out DDT, and soon, but we can't do that without first giving those at risk from malaria the education, information and adequate tools needed to fight the disease. This will require a sustained effort and a political commitment from both the developed and developing worlds.

To discuss this topic with others, visit the Internet discussion forum at www.david-suzuki.org.

*Dr. David Suzuki is a scientist, broadcaster, author and chairperson of the David Suzuki Foundation. He is familiar to television audiences as host of the long-running CBC television program *The Nature of Things*. He is currently a professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.*

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