
37 Million and Counting...

A documentary film

The Subject

Imagine having thousands of tiny worms swimming through your eyes for years, eventually blinding you. African river blindness (onchocerciasis) is a disease that plagues 37 million people worldwide, and is the second leading infectious cause of blindness. *Onchocerca volvulus*, the parasitic worm that causes the disease, is transmitted by the bite of a blackfly and deposited under human skin where it grows in a protective nodule to lengths of 50 centimeters (19 in.). Adult worms can live up to 20 years in a human host, releasing millions of tiny worms (microfilariae) each year. These microfilariae wreak havoc on the body, causing skin lesions, seizures, and the permanent, crippling blindness for which the disease is best known. River blindness is most dramatically a problem in 27 countries on the African continent, where over 90 million people are at risk of infection. Incredibly, this disease is both preventable and treatable by either (1) controlling the blackfly population with pesticides or by managing their breeding sites in running water, or (2) by administering the drug Ivermectin which kills the immature worms that constitute the clinical disease. Nodules harboring the parasite can be removed surgically in some cases, but this procedure comes with significant risk and is not a feasible method of mass treatment.

In 1987, pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co., Inc. made the unprecedented announcement that it would donate Mectizan® (Ivermectin) to “all who needed it for as long as needed”. So far Merck has spent \$383 million to reach 60 million people in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, and has partnered up with the delivery company DHL to help get Mectizan to the patients who need it. Mectizan is a safe but insufficiently effective pharmaceutical used to treat river blindness once a person has been infected by the parasite. It works by killing the tiny immature worms called “microfilariae” that invade the body, thereby eliminating most clinical symptoms of the disease. Mectizan does *not* kill the adult worms, however, which remain in the body producing millions of microfilariae each year. Because the adult worms are spared, patients must remain on treatment for as long as it takes the adult worms to die, or for as long as disease transmission occurs; a period that now runs between 20 to 25 years.

Sustainability is a major obstacle to this method of treatment. In addition to the long treatment regimen, the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC), the main organization overseeing Mectizan treatment programs, will dissolve when its funding is terminated in 2010, forcing Merck to seek out other methods of distribution. It is hoped that community directed programs, which have shown promise on the small-scale, will continue to control river blindness beyond 2010. If the intensity of river blindness control wanes during this period, or if new drugs that kill adult worms as well as microfilariae are not developed, experts warn that river blindness could return full-scale.

River blindness is still an important public health problem and a significant threat to people living in areas where transmission occurs. Does Mectizan reach the people it is intended to reach? Do all of the 37 million currently infected with the parasite have access to Ivermectin? What will happen when the main organizing body that distributes Ivermectin, the African Programme for River blindness Control, dissolves in 2010? What must be done to prevent a significant recurrence of this disease? We will explore these questions and others in *37 Million and Counting...*

The Plan

This is a unique point in history for river blindness control. Current infection control techniques have reduced the global burden of river blindness enough to push the disease out of the international media spotlight, but these techniques alone will not be adequate to eliminate river blindness as a public health priority.

The majority of people in the world remain unaware of this urgent public health issue. Using the effective medium of documentary film, we plan to travel to an river blindness-endemic region of Africa to take a firsthand look at river blindness control efforts. By interviewing regional medical personnel, local patients, delivery coordinators and others, we hope to uncover solid, concrete information regarding the environment surrounding river blindness control. We want to learn on-site why people are still getting the disease, who is still getting it, and what kind of information needs to be shared in order to construct the most effective and efficient control program possible. We would like to explore aspects of the Mectizan Donation Program that are working as well as those that need improvement, and we will pay special attention to issues that affect the long-term sustainability of this program. The film will also include information on research into anti-onchocerca pharmaceuticals, an area likely to be critical in quelling this epidemic.

We aim to situate accurate medical and scientific information about river blindness within the larger context of its devastating impact on communities and local infrastructures by uncovering personal stories that will put a face on the immense suffering caused by this disease.

The information gathered will be presented in a 30-minute documentary feature. We plan to (1) raise awareness about the burden of river blindness to lay people, students in health professions, and others in the United States as well as Tanzania, (2) create a film that objectively brings the human side of this disease to the viewer, and (3) to do so via accurate, firsthand information that is engaging and motivational.

The Team

Aimée Peck, Project Director/Producer

Aimée is a first year medical student at Dartmouth Medical School with a fiery passion for infectious diseases and a soft spot in her heart for the people they affect. Her major goal in life is to work in the fascinating and challenging field of tropical medicine, with a focus on prevention and treatment for those who have been traditionally underserved by the medical community in the developing world. Aimée graduated from Barnard College magna cum laude with a B.A. in biochemistry in 2006. In 2005 she published an abstract

on the relationship between estrogen and leptin levels in men with idiopathic osteoporosis for the 27th annual meeting of the American Society for Bone and Mineral Research in Nashville, Tennessee. While earning her undergraduate degree, she was employed as a clinical study coordinator at New York Presbyterian Hospital in New York City where she worked on projects involving unexplained osteoporosis in men. Aimée also did volunteer work with Dr. Teresa DePineres for her research into colposcopy quality control at the University of California, San Francisco, and was awarded a Howard Hughes Medical Internship to work with Dr. Ann Shinnar at Barnard College. Aimée served as a Board Member for the Barnard Columbia Undergraduate Public Health Society (BCUPHS), where she organized presentations by scholars, professors, and other professionals in the field of public health. Aimée was also a member of the Columbia University Sailing Team and participates in ballet and ceramics.

Aaron Edell, *Documentary Director/Producer*

Aaron's passion for filmmaking began when he was five and grew into a professional career by the time he was in high school with a deal to create ten five-minute video shorts for a cable television show entitled "StandBy TV" in 2000-2001. Aaron has completed over 100 separate video projects and worked on many others. He graduated from Hampshire College with a B.A. in film/video and in pre-medical studies. Presently Aaron is a producer and editor for the PBS documentary television series "Character Studies" in New York City. He works closely with the executive producer to brainstorm and put each episode for the second season into production. He also manages the company's offices and is involved in fundraising. He also works as a freelance producer of short medical videos for Realhealth.tv, a website dedicated to short medical documentaries. In 2005, Aaron's documentary film "Exhibit Human", a documentary about plastination (a method of preserving organic material such as human corpses, organs and fetuses so that they can be put on display and even touched) and its importance won official selection for the Cinequest Film Festival in San Jose, CA in 2005. He also worked as a laboratory assistant for Dr. Dula Amarasiriwardena for two years, was a teacher's assistant for a chemistry course, and worked as a research assistant for Dr. Chris Jarvis on a project involving a pharmacological study of a botanical substance and its effects on the immune system. Aaron has worked hard to fuse his love for science and medicine with his love for filmmaking, and wishes to continue to do so.

Rosalind Stevens, M.D., *Faculty Consultant*

Dr. Rosalind Stevens is a board-certified ophthalmologist currently practicing at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, NH. Dr. Stevens specializes in vitreoretinal surgery and retinal vascular disease, and is an expert in international ophthalmology. She has been a member of Orbis International, a global humanitarian nonprofit organization that works in developing countries to save sight, since 1991 and she became a medical director in 2001. She is currently on the Cyber-Sight Advisory Board of Orbis International. Cyber-Sight uses the power of the internet to provide responsive consultative assistance and educational material to eye healthcare providers around the world.

Dean Edell, M.D. , *Consulting Producer*

Dr. Edell is the nation's leading physician when it comes to accurately informing the public of science and medicine. With a passion for the truth, he has been crusading against inaccurate medical information and dispelling common myths since he began his career in the 1970's, using any effective medium possible from television and radio to books and other print formats. Dr. Edell began his career as one of the first "media doctors" in 1978 on KGO Radio in San Francisco. He has been the host of numerous television series on health, including programs for Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, and national syndication, and was the co-author of the Edell Health Letter, published from 1982 until 1994. Over the past 20 years of broadcasting, he has won numerous media awards for his on-air work, including the C. Everett Koop Media Awards competition, the Edward R. Murrow Award, a national Emmy, the American Cancer Society recognition award, the American Heart Association award, and other prestigious medical and media awards. He has been a regular anchor for ABC news in San Francisco, the author of two books; *Eat, Drink, & Be Merry* (Harper, 2000) and *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Healthiness* (Harper, 2005) among many other things. Currently, Dr. Edell is the host of America's second most popular syndicated radio talk show, The Dr. Dean Edell Show, heard in more than 400 radio stations, as well as the anchor of Medical Minutes, a series of ten weekly radio medical reports. He is also the host of the daily 90-second Medical Report seen in 75 television markets. Dr. Edell is known for translating complicated medical information into concise, easy-to-understand reports and for tackling topics that are obscure, unusual and often controversial. Edell will bring his vast experience of combining medicine and effective media communication to consult on this project.

Jeannette Boudreau Esq., *Legal Services/Consultant*

Jeannette is a passionate and experienced entertainment lawyer with a unique love for art and film. Boudreau worked as an executive in the radio broadcasting industry in San Francisco from 1973 to 1983 at KGO radio (which was heard up and down the west coast) where she was responsible for public affairs and newstalk programs. She received her law degree from USF Law School in San Francisco while working in radio and became a member of the California Bar in 1980. She began to practice law full time after the birth of her youngest child in 1985. She has been practicing entertainment law in Marin County, CA for 22 years representing artists, musicians, writers, radio and television producers, and film makers. Some of her clients are documentary film makers and television producers providing programming on subjects of public interest. She also provides pro bono legal services for the AIDS Legal Referral Panel of the San Francisco Bar Association and has been honored by the panel for 10 years of service. For five years, Boudreau co-wrote and published "The People's Medical Journal", later called the "Edell Health Letter". The consumer-oriented newsletter was a collection of health stories, research, and items of interest presented by Dr. Dean Edell in his daily syndicated radio program. Boudreau is a member of the State Bar of California, the San Francisco Bar Association, the Marin County Bar Association Intellectual Property Section, and Queen's Bench. Jeannette will be donating her legal services to this project.

The Goal and Our Audience

This film is being made to:

- combat river blindness' label as a neglected tropical disease among the international community, and to
- advocate locally for river blindness education specifically in Tanzania.

A number of experts have described significant challenges facing the future of river blindness control. We believe that some of these challenges are exacerbated by factors like (1) international donor fatigue, (2) the absence of a new pharmaceutical that kills adult worms as well as microfilariae, and (3) remarkably successful community control programs that lack a source of sustained future support. All of these factors are to some extent symptoms of a lack of awareness on the part of the mainstream international community. The purpose of this documentary will be to bring the burden of river blindness back into the spotlight of international attention with the goal of generating interest and revitalizing funding for the control of this disease.

We plan to shoot this documentary with a high definition video camera. Aesthetically pleasing, high definition video will bring a more realistic aspect to the content and expand the versatility of our project. Once the documentary is completed, we will submit it to national and international film festivals, paying special attention to film festivals catering to themes such as health, sustainability, science, the developing world, and medicine. A tentative listing of the film festivals to which we will submit our film can be found below. Participation in film festivals is a popular way for independent documentary films like ours to gain public recognition. We will also submit our film to the Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, PBS, and other similar networks. Because our documentary will be filmed using high definition video, our content is more likely to be accepted by networks like these, which are constantly looking to bolster their new high definition channels with material. We would also like to distribute, for free, our documentary to universities, medical schools, and other educational organizations both in our area and abroad. Our goal is to expose this information to as many people as possible, including professionals in the medical community, philanthropists, and activists.

We are at a crossroads in river blindness control. Recent research points to a major recurrence of the disease if a number of steps are not taken. River blindness was taken out of the limelight following the great successes of the Mectizan Donation Program in the early-mid 1990's, but it is still a major public health issue in areas where it persists. Those familiar with the history of Malaria control know the real danger of disease recurrence, and it would be a grave disappointment, an injustice, to see river blindness control come so far only to fail because of factors like donor fatigue and a lack of new technology.

Production Schedule

January 2007 – May 2007
 Fundraising
 Pre Production & Planning
 June 2007 – July 2007
 Production (Africa & Domestic)
 July 2007 – September 2007
 Post Production
 September 2007
 Major Distribution & Duplication
 Film Festivals

Budget

PRE PRODUCTION		Travel	
Research	\$1,200	Air Fare (2 tickets to Tanzania)	\$3,600.00
Supplies	\$700	Hotel	\$1,456.00
Fund Raising	\$300	Travel Supplies	\$1,000.00
		Car, Taxi, Bus service	\$500
Total	\$2,200		
		Misc.	
PRODUCTION		Tanzania Student Stipend	\$25.00
Camera		Interpreter	\$350.00
Canon XL H1 High Def Camera	\$8,900.00	Food	\$1,400.00
8 hour Lithium Battery x2	\$699.98		
Battery Charger	\$279.99	Total	\$20,084.81
Hard Travel Case	\$299.99		
LaCie D2 1TB Hard Drive	\$300.00	POST PRODUCTION	
Blackmagic Decklink SDI PCI	\$289.95	Editing	\$300
4GBS RAM for G5	\$396.00	Music	\$500
		Film Festivals	\$1,000
Audio		Distribution & Duplication	\$1,700.00
Omni Lavalier Mic, wired	\$99.95	Printing	\$550.00
900 MHz lavalier mic, wireless	\$99.95		
100ft XLR cable	\$38.50	Total	\$4,050
		15% Contingency	\$3,950.22
Expendables			
DVC tapes x50	\$349.50	Grand Total	\$30,285.03

We Need Your Help

**To
Donate:**

Make check payable to "Film/Video Arts inc."

In memo put "37 Million and Counting"

Send checks, along with full address of donor to:
Aaron Edell
610 W 141st St.
Apt. 2F
New York, NY
10031

In order to accomplish the goals that we have set forth, we need your help. Our plan is to apply for various health/medicine related grants offered to Dartmouth Medical Students, medical students in general, and independent documentary film makers, among many others. However, we don't anticipate this covering our full budget.

We have set up a fiscal sponsor so that all personal donations can be made tax deductible. You will be donating to a 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization, and you will receive a letter to that effect after your donation. In-kind services donations are also welcome, as well as any other kind of financial help. To donate, write a personal check to "Film/Video Arts Inc." and in the memo line of the check write "37 Million and Counting" and the name "Aaron Edell". Include a letter with the check stating that you are funding the project "37 Million and Counting" for Aaron Edell, and include your return address so that a thank-you letter can be sent to you, which you can use as proof of your donation. Mail checks to: Aaron Edell, 610 W 141st Street, Apt. 2F, New York, NY 10031.

It is important to us that this message be heard by as many people as possible, and the more funds we have, the more effective we can make this message. As young professionals and medical students, we feel it is our duty to be as resourceful as possible in making positive change anywhere we can. Help these 37 million people anyway you can. Raising awareness for this disease can be just as valuable, if not more valuable than some of the more traditional methods of economic aid and support. Be a part of this project, help us get African river blindness off of the "neglected diseases" list.

Any questions can be directed to the following people:

Aaron Edell – aaronedell@gmail.com

Aimée Peck - aimée.r.peck@dartmouth.edu

<http://www.37millionandcounting.com>

FILM FESTIVALS

U.S.A./Canada

The Freddie Awards – San Bruno, California
Sundance Independent Film Festival - Park City, Utah
Tribeca Film Festival - New York, New York
Toronto International Film Festival - Toronto, Ontario
AFI Los Angeles International Film Festival - California
Brooklyn Film Festival - Brooklyn, New York
Festival International Nouveau Cinema - Montreal, Quebec

Chicago International Film Festival - Chicago, Illinois
USA Film Festival - Dallas, Texas
Santa Barbara International Film Festival - California
Hamptons International Film Festival - Stony Brook, New York
Slamdance Film Festival - Park City, Utah
Telluride Film Festival - Telluride, Colorado
Austin Film Festival – Austin, Texas

International

Cannes International Film Festival - Cannes, France
Venice Film Festival – Venice, Italy
Jerusalem Film Festival - Jerusalem, Israel
Berlin International Film Festival - Berlin, Germany
Moscow International Film Festival - Moscow,
Russia

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