

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

Today is World Malaria Day – a special day to commemorate the victims and the survivors of malaria – and to recognise a global community dedicated to the elimination of malaria: health workers, researchers, national malaria control programmes, international organisations and private companies engaged in the fight against the disease. This deadly yet preventable disease remains endemic to more than 80 countries and territories worldwide. April 25th also offers us a moment to reflect on what it will take to achieve a malaria-free world. This is especially relevant as most of the key institutions involved in the fight against malaria are poised to update their strategies this year.

We are in the midst of multiple global health challenges. The toll on health systems worldwide by COVID-19 has no doubt impeded our collective action to fight malaria. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to see how the community has stepped up despite the obstacles and how the pandemic is fuelling new ways to think about how best to defeat malaria.

As a major manufacturer of long-lasting insecticidal nets (LLINs), our focus at the onset of the pandemic was on preventing any disruption to our supply chains. We mitigated by protecting the health of our workers and securing the resources necessary for the production and delivery of our bednets. We also continued with our plans to install new machinery to triple our production capacity for our next-generation PBO bed nets and meet the growing demand in time to save more lives.

Faster than the mosquitos mutate?

Since the turn of the millennium, the “conventional” bednet has contributed to almost 70 % of the averted malaria cases in countries where the disease is endemic. Due to a multitude of factors, including their cost-effectiveness, bednets will continue to be the bedrock of malaria control programmes for as long as there continues to be malaria transmission through vectors. However, in the face of spreading insecticide resistance over the past few years, the malaria community has realised that we could not continue to use the same tools. We need to innovate faster than the mosquito mutates.

While PBO nets are fast becoming the 'standard of care' for malaria prevention in Sub-Saharan Africa, we still need new types of nets to defeat mosquitoes and their resistance mechanisms against insecticide. Vestergaard has been hard at work on dual active ingredient nets, one of which has now reached the final stages of the research and development process.

New bednets require new evaluation tools

Bednet chemistry and polymer science take years to identify, develop and approve, but other challenges lie in the path to ensuring the right tools are available. It continues to take many months and years for new products to be evaluated and widely adopted in campaigns. As we are in a race against time, we should do whatever it takes to accelerate our joint efforts.

In the quest to deploy more effective bednets, we need better and simpler tools to systematically evaluate bednet effectiveness in different geographies. Current evaluation tools are not well suited to determine efficacy in real conditions of use and if efficacy can be sustained over time. Unless we urgently develop new evaluation tools, it will take many more years to bring better tools to the mass deployment stage.

More strategic engagement within the malaria community

To pick-up the pace of innovation, one thing is needed more than anything else: strategic partnerships. Vestergaard strongly believes that only if key institutions and the private sector work hand-in-hand will we be able to unlock our full potential and move closer to a world free of malaria.

There is much to gain from closer collaborations:

- improved impact through the generation of and use of data in the development and deployment of tools,

- reduced time, reduced costs and increased scale for new and more effective products
- reduced environmental impact in the manufacturing and delivery of nets

Strategic partnerships are essential to accelerate the pace of our collective progress and ultimately, to create greater equity in how we deliver essential malaria commodities for all who are at risk. I believe we can multiply our impact by working together as partners. Together, we can make a difference!

Yours sincerely,

Michael Joos