Lack of Active *Onchocerca volvulus* Transmission in the Northern Chiapas Focus of Mexico

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Abstract. The northern Chiapas onchocerciasis focus has undergone 11 years of ivermectin mass treatment. No evidence of microfilariae in the cornea and/or anterior chamber of the eye or in skin snips was seen in residents examined in 2006 in two sentinel communities (upper limit of the 95% confidence interval [UL 95% CI] = 0.5% and 0.3%, respectively). In children 10 and under, 0 of 305 were found to harbor antibodies to Ov16, a marker of parasite exposure; 0 of 4,400 *Simulium ochraceum* s.l. collected in 2005 contained parasite DNA, giving an UL 95% CI for the infective rate of 0.9/2,000, and an UL 95% CI of the seasonal transmission potential of 1.2 L3/person. These data, assumed to be representative of the focus as a whole, suggest that there is no ongoing transmission of *Onchocerca volvulus* in the northern Chiapas focus. Community-wide treatments with ivermectin were halted in 2008, and a post-treatment surveillance phase was initiated.

INTRODUCTION

Human onchocerciasis is a debilitating disease caused by infection with the filarial parasite *Onchocerca volvulus*. It has historically been one of the leading causes of infectious blindness worldwide, and it remains an important public health problem. Human onchocerciasis is endemic in six countries in Latin America (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Mexico), where 510,947 individuals are currently estimated to be at risk.1 In Mexico, three endemic foci have been defined: Oaxaca, northern Chiapas, and southern Chiapas. The onchocerciasis program in Mexico began treatment with ivermectin (Mectizan; Merck & Co., Inc., Whitehouse Station, NJ) in 1989, initially treating only symptomatic individuals in hyperendemic communities. From 1991 to 1997, biannual treatments were extended to symptomatic residents of mesoendemic and hypoendemic communities as well. In 1997, this strategy was modified to provide mass treatment to every eligible resident in all of the at-risk communities, regardless of endemicity.

There is no precise information about when the northern Chiapas endemic focus of onchocerciasis was discovered, but it was unearthed after the other two foci in Mexico were identified, most likely in 1951 when health personnel began providing systematic health care in this area.2,3 The at-risk population in the northern Chiapas focus consists of indigenous people representing a mixture of diverse ethnic groups (mainly tzeltal and tzotzil). In 1979, de Castro2,3 suggested that the onchocerciasis in the northern Chiapas focus resulted from the annual seasonal migration of the tzeltal and tzotzil coffee workers to and from coffee plantations in the southern Chiapas focus, an area where, historically, the transmission levels were high. The number of endemic communities in northern Chiapas as detected by clinically defined cases of onchocerciasis (i.e., individuals with nodules, positive skin biopsies, or a positive Mazzotti reaction) has been decreasing over time, probably because of the impact of control measures.

For example, in 1989, there were 72 endemic communities with 351 clinical cases of onchocerciasis. In 1993, 42 endemic communities with 180 clinical cases were reported by the local programs. In 2000, this dropped to 13 endemic communities with 83 clinical cases, and in 2007, only 13 endemic communities were found, containing a total of 77 clinically defined cases. Currently, only 13 communities are considered to be at risk in the entire focus of northern Chiapas (Figure 1). In the last 20–30 years, the social and economic structure of the indigenous population of the northern Chiapas focus has been changing: young people have been abandoning the endemic area and migrating to industrialized urban cities, particularly in northern Mexico and the United States. In contrast, the seasonal migration of workers from northern Chiapas to the coffee plantation areas of southern Chiapas has declined. This latter decline of seasonal migration into the onchocerciasis endemic areas of southern Chiapas may have had an impact on the transmission of onchocerciasis, because no individuals harboring nodules have been observed in northern Chiapas since 1996. It has been hypothesized that onchocerciasis infections in the northern focus are solely a result of this seasonal migration and that no independent transmission of the parasite occurred in this focus. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the indigenous populations in the northern Chiapas focus are generally free of the infection if they have not traveled outside the endemic area.2,5 However, entomologic and serologic studies carried out in 2001 and 2005 indicated that autochthonous transmission of *O. volvulus* might be occurring in the northern Chiapas focus, albeit at a low level.2,5,6

The conclusion that transmission of *O. volvulus* is rare or non-existent in northern Chiapas is supported by the clinical incidence reports from the local health officials. The last five new clinical cases (i.e., individuals diagnosed positive for nodules or skin microfilariae [mf] for the first time) were reported in 1996 (Figure 2), when four individuals who had traveled outside of northern Chiapas were found to contain mf in skin snips.

Northern Chiapas is the second smallest of 13 foci of onchocerciasis in Latin America after Naicioná, Colombia.1 It falls under the mandate of the Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas (OEPA). The ultimate goal of OEPA is to eliminate onchocerciasis from the Americas.
In efforts to reach this goal, OEPA has established interim goals to eliminate new cases of onchocerciasis-induced ocular morbidity caused by infection with *O. volvulus* and to interrupt transmission of the parasite by 2012. The World Health Organization (WHO) and OEPA have established a series of epidemiologic and entomologic criteria for onchocerciasis to be declared as eliminated. The WHO/OEPA criteria include three points. (1) The elimination of new ocular morbidity (defined as a prevalence of <1% of *O. volvulus* microfilariae in the cornea and/or anterior chamber of the eye). (2) A reduction of new infections to an incidence rate of less than 1 new case per 1,000 individuals (<0.1%). This criterion has been operationally interpreted as lack of specific antibodies to *O. volvulus* in children under the age of 10. The sample size required to calculate a one-sided 95% confidence interval (CI) for a point prevalence that excludes 0.1% is 3,000 children. In foci in which fewer than 3,000 children under the age of 10 reside, it is expected that all of the children of that age in the focus will be tested and that none will bear evidence of parasite exposure. (3) The absence, or near absence, of infective-stage larvae of *O. volvulus* in the vector population. This has been operationally interpreted as an upper bound to the prevalence of infective flies of less than 1/2,000.

In the first entomologic study of transmission in the northern Chiapas focus carried out in 2001, evidence for a low level of transmission was found. In a follow-up study conducted in 2005, none of the bodies of the 4,400 flies collected carried parasite DNA, suggesting that vector–parasite contact had ceased. It was assumed that if the bodies were negative, then the heads would be so also. However, that approach did not allow the researchers to definitively state that the flies did not contain infectious-stage parasites.

Here, we report data obtained from an in-depth epidemiological follow-up study of onchocerciasis in northern Chiapas conducted throughout 2006. We also report data showing an absence of infective larvae in the flies collected in the entomologic study conducted in 2005.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Study area.** In 1995, local health authorities selected two sentinel communities of the northern Chiapas. Historically, these communities exhibited the highest prevalence of clinical onchocerciasis cases in the region. The sentinel communities included Altugracia (17°01′51″ N, 92°46′02″ W; elevation = 1,300 m above sea level) and El Ambar (17°01′29″ N, 17°01′29″ W; elevation = 1,610 meters). The overall prevalence in the entire focus in 1995 was 0.8% (146 clinical cases of onchocerciasis in a total population of 18,891 individuals divided among 42 communities). These two sentinel communities were epidemiologically classified as hypoendemic for onchocerciasis, similar to the other communities of this focus. The present in-depth epidemiological assessment was conducted in 2005 and 2006 in these sentinel communities. The population of these two communities in 2006 totaled 1,391 individuals (Altugracia contained 578 individuals and El Ambar contained 813 individuals).

**Entomologic study.** Black flies were collected by using standard procedures from February to May 2005 coinciding with the peak *O. volvulus* transmission season. The collections were carried out during the first 50 minutes of
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ENTOMOLOGICAL STUDY. A total of 4,400 host-seeking *S. ochraceum* s.l. females were collected during the peak transmission period of February through May 2005 from two sentinel communities in the northern Chiapas focus endemic for *O. volvulus*. The proportion of individuals positive to infection with mf in skin snips and mf in the cornea and/or anterior chamber of the eye was calculated as the number of positive individuals divided by the total number examined, and expressed as a percentage. The associated exact 95% CIs of the proportion of individuals harboring Ov16 antibodies were determined using the Miettinen method described by Armitage and Berry. The same method was used to estimate the 95% exact CIs surrounding the point prevalence of MFC, MFAC, and skin mf.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS. Poolscreen v2.0 was used to calculate a prevalence of infectivity in the fly-vector populations together with the associated 95% CIs. The prevalence of infective flies was then combined with estimates of the biting rate (calculated from the fly-collection data as described above) to calculate an estimated STP. *S. ochraceum* s.l. were collected during the peak transmission period of February through May 2005 from two sentinel communities in the northern Chiapas focus endemic for *O. volvulus*. The proportion of individuals positive to infection with mf in skin snips and mf in the cornea and/or anterior chamber of the eye was calculated as the number of positive individuals divided by the total number examined, and expressed as a percentage. The associated exact 95% CIs of the proportion of individuals harboring Ov16 antibodies were determined using the Miettinen method described by Armitage and Berry. The same method was used to estimate the 95% exact CIs surrounding the point prevalence of MFC, MFAC, and skin mf.

RESULTS

ENTOMOLOGICAL STUDY. A total of 4,400 host-seeking *S. ochraceum* s.l. females were collected during the peak transmission period of February through May 2005 from two sentinel communities in the northern Chiapas focus endemic for *O. volvulus*. A total of 4,400 host-seeking *S. ochraceum* s.l. females were collected during the peak transmission period of February through May 2005 from two sentinel communities in the northern Chiapas focus endemic for *O. volvulus*. A total of 4,400 host-seeking *S. ochraceum* s.l. females were collected during the peak transmission period of February through May 2005 from two sentinel communities in the northern Chiapas focus endemic for *O. volvulus*.
had an upper bound on the 95% CI of 0.9/2,000. Similarly, the upper bound of the 95% CI for the STP was 1.2 L3/season.

**Sero logical study.** Of the 305 children 10 years and under (representing all the children in that age group in the sentinel communities) that were tested for IgG4 antibodies, 0 were positive. Therefore, the estimated prevalence of *O. volvulus* exposure in the sentinel communities was 0% (Table 2).

**Ophthalmologic study.** No MFC and/or MFAC were found among the 682 residents tested of 1,391 individuals in the two sentinel communities (Table 2; 95% upper limit [UL] = 0.5%).

**Parasitologic study.** Of 986 residents examined by skin biopsy (total population = 1,391 individuals), 0 were found to have microfilariae in the two sentinel communities (Table 2; 95% UL = 0.3%).

**DISCUSSION**

The absence of new clinically defined cases of onchocerciasis in the entire northern Chiapas focus during the last decade (Figure 2) provides indirect support to the hypothesis that parasite transmission is no longer ongoing in this focus. This finding suggests that endemic onchocerciasis no longer represents a serious health risk to the endemic community in northern Chiapas. However, it is still possible that new cases might be introduced into this region from migration from other areas of Mexico where transmission is still ongoing, such as southern Chiapas. This risk is likely to be less than past levels, because the population in the northern Chiapas focus no longer conducts seasonal migration to southern Chiapas at the levels seen historically. However, the risk of re-infection from southern Chiapas, although decreased from historic levels, still exists.

No evidence for infective parasites in the vector, or for new parasite exposure in the human population, was found in the two sentinel communities examined in this study, supporting the conclusion that there is currently no ongoing transmission of *O. volvulus* in the northern Chiapas focus. As a result, community-wide treatments with ivermectin were halted in northern Chiapas in 2008, and post-treatment surveillance activities in this focus were initiated. Thus, northern Chiapas joins the five other foci in Latin America where transmission seems to have been interrupted: Oaxaca in Mexico, Santa Rosa, Huehuetenango, and Escuintla-Guatemala in Guatemala, and López de Micay in Colombia.

The entomological criteria for asserting interruption of transmission includes the absence or near absence of infective-stage larvae of *O. volvulus* in the vector population, which has been operationally defined as < 1 infective fly per 2,000 examined. During the first entomologic study carried out in Altagracia of the northern Chiapas focus, which was conducted in 2001 after 4 years of mass semiannual treatment with Mectizan, parasite DNA was detected in a single pool of 50 vector heads out of a total of 125 pools examined (6,250 flies total). The prevalence of infective flies was 0.32/2,000 (95% CI = 0.008–1.65/2,000), leading to an STP of 1.5 L3 (95% CI = 0.44–7.7) per person per season. In the present study, the prevalence of infective flies collected in 2005 was 0/2,000 for both sentinel communities. The maximum value of the 95% CI surrounding the zero point estimate was 0.9/2,000, which is below the threshold of 1/2,000.

In addition to the 1/2,000 infective fly threshold, OEPA, during an OEPA-convened meeting of entomologists in September 2006, recommended the use of the ATP (which, in the present situation, is equivalent to STP) to assess the status of onchocerciasis transmission. This is because the true rate of exposure of an at-risk population is dependent not only on the prevalence of infection in the vector population but also on the degree of contact between the vector and at-risk populations. Furthermore, in some areas where the vector density is low, it may be difficult or impossible to collect sufficient vector insects to conclusively show that the prevalence of infection is below a set threshold value. Using the ATP or STP as a metric, therefore, more accurately represents the level of exposure of the at-risk community to the parasite, because it takes into account both the level of infection and the degree of host-vector contact. Unfortunately, the threshold level of the ATP below which the parasite population is unable to sustain itself has not been accurately defined. Estimates for this threshold value for the ATP have ranged from 5 to 54 L3/person/year using mathematical modeling and from 7.6 to 18 L3/person/year using field observations. In northern Chiapas, the estimated upper bound for the STP was below even the lowest of these estimates (1.2 L3/person/year). This suggests that if conditions remain unchanged, any parasite population remaining in this focus will be unable to recover; therefore, the population is on the path to elimination.

The epidemiological data presented above also suggest that transmission in northern Chiapas is no longer occurring. During the first large-scale serologic study carried out in this area in 2001, IgG4 antibodies to Ov16 were detected using a prototype immunochromatographic card test (ICT; AMRAD, Sydney, Australia) in a population of 922 individuals aged 16 years and younger from the sentinel communities described above, as well as 10 additional endemic and non-endemic communities. None of these samples contained detectable IgG4

### Table 1

Transmission intensity of *O. volvulus* in two sentinel communities of northern Chiapas, Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Seasonal biting rate (no. of <em>S. ochraceum</em> bites per person per season)</th>
<th>Prevalence of infective flies*</th>
<th>Seasonal transmission potential*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altargracia</td>
<td>2.227</td>
<td>0 (1.08)</td>
<td>0 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Ambar</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>0 (4.4)</td>
<td>0 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.671</td>
<td>0 (0.9)</td>
<td>0 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The value represents the point estimate, and the value in parentheses represents the 95% upper limit CI surrounding the point estimate.

### Table 2

*O. volvulus* infection and exposure in the human population in two sentinel communities of northern Chiapas, Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>No. examined/total population</th>
<th>Prevalence of MFC and/or MFAC*</th>
<th>Population (no. examined)</th>
<th>Prevalence of skin mf*</th>
<th>Prevalence of IgG4 antibodies to Ov16/no. examined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altargracia</td>
<td>225/578</td>
<td>0 (1.6%)</td>
<td>578 (317)</td>
<td>0 (1.1%)</td>
<td>0/225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Ambar</td>
<td>457/813</td>
<td>0 (0.8%)</td>
<td>813 (669)</td>
<td>0 (0.5%)</td>
<td>0/80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>682/1,391</td>
<td>0 (0.5%)</td>
<td>1,391 (986)</td>
<td>0 (0.3%)</td>
<td>0/305</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The value represents the point estimate, and the value in parentheses represents the 95% upper limit CI surrounding the point estimate.
antibody to Ov16, leading to a post-exposure incidence of 0% (95% UL = 0.3%). The subsequent serologic studies reported above examined all children 10 years and younger in the sentinel communities. Again, none were positive. When these studies are combined, 1,241 individual serum samples were examined, and none were positive, leading to an upper bound of the 95% CI of a maximum prevalence of 0.2% in this area; this suggests that parasite contact among children is no longer occurring. Although the number of individuals examined was less than the 3,000 necessary to ensure that the prevalence was less than 0.1%, the study did enroll all children in the sentinel communities, thus meeting the WHO and OEPA criteria for incidence in this situation.

Although migration of infected flies from neighboring communities could occur after treatment is stopped, this mechanism of reintroduction of infection is unlikely. The only two formerly endemic communities located within the flight range of the vector (around 3.5 km)\(^2\) are El Carrizal and San Miguel (Figure 1). Both of these communities have also been receiving ivermectin treatment at the same coverage levels as those of El Ambar and Altagracia. Consequently, the level of infection in migrating flies from these communities is likely to be similar to that in the sentinel communities. The other 11 endemic communities are outside the flight range of the vector, extending as far away as 30 km from the sentinel communities. Similarly, the threat of vector-borne infection from the other foci in Mexico, Oaxaca and southern Chiapas, is very slight; these foci are separated by 380 km and 120 km, respectively, from northern Chiapas (Figure 1), distances that are over 100 times that of the flight range of the vector black fly.

The process for certification of the elimination of onchocerciasis consists of four phases.\(^8,35\) Phase I includes ivermectin treatment until transmission is suppressed. In Phase II, suppression is maintained through treatment of the mean reproductive lifespan of the adult female. In Phase III, the adult parasite population should have died by senescence, and removal of ivermectin treatment will not result in a resumption of transmission. The data suggest that this is the current situation in the northern Chiapas focus. To help guide the certification of elimination of the \textit{O. volvulus} infection (Phase IV), studies on parasite transmission in the post-treatment era in the northern Chiapas focus will be needed for 3 years after treatment has ceased. These studies are currently underway.

Taken together, the entomologic and epidemiologic data presented in this study suggest that currently there is no ongoing transmission of \textit{O. volvulus} in the northern Chiapas focus. Although some of the sample sizes collected were insufficient to satisfy the most stringent criteria promulgated by the OEPA and WHO because of the small population sizes of the sentinel communities and the low density of the vectors in the area, no evidence for ongoing transmission was detected in the samples. In light of these results, local and federal Mexican health authorities agreed with the OEPA steering committee’s (the Program Coordinating Committee) recommendation that community-wide ivermectin distribution should be suspended in the northern Chiapas focus in 2008. This is to be followed by an intensive surveillance program to assure that transmission will not reemerge in this area of limited focus.

Acknowledgments: We are very grateful to all of the people from the sentinel and extra-sentinel communities in the northern Chiapas focus who enthusiastically participated throughout this study. The authors thank the personnel of the Ministry of Health (the Mexican Onchocerciasis Elimination Program), Drs. Jorge F. Méndez-Galván and Miguel Angel Lutteroth, for providing valuable assistance during this study. We appreciate the people that have participated with laboratory PCR work (Cristian Lizarazo-Ortega and Wendy Lizeth Cruz-Pulido of Centro de Biotecnología Genómica-Instituto Politécnico Nacional in Reynosa, Mexico) and field work (Drs. Jorge Alberto Pastor-Santiago and Isabel Eugenia Rico-Nango, former person in charges the vector-borne diseases program in Chiapas and coordinator of onchocerciasis brigades in Chiapas, respectively). We are much obliged to Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas ophthalmologist Dr. Héctor Margeli-Pérez, whose enthusiastic participation made this study feasible. Finally, Drs. Nancy Cruz and Nidia Rizzo (Center for Health Studies of the University of Valley in Guatemala) made this study possible with their participation in the serology testing. We thank Geographist Irma Angélica Morélos-Rodríguez for designing the map of Figure 1. The authors thank all other people that have contributed to the completion of this study.

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