One Hundred Years After Its Discovery in Guatemala by Rodolfo Robles, *Onchocerca volvulus* Transmission Has Been Eliminated from the Central Endemic Zone


River Blindness Elimination Program, The Carter Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Centro de Estudios en Salud of the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala (UVG), Guatemala City, Guatemala; Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social, Guatemala City, Guatemala; Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas (OEP A), The Carter Center, Guatemala City, Guatemala; Global Health Infectious Disease Program, Department of Global Health, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida; Division of Parasitic Diseases and Malaria, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia; Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama

**Abstract.** We report the elimination of *Onchocerca volvulus* transmission from the Central Endemic Zone (CEZ) of onchocerciasis in Guatemala, the largest focus of this disease in the Americas and the first to be discovered in this hemisphere by Rodolfo Robles Valverde in 1915. Mass drug administration (MDA) with ivermectin was launched in 1988, with semiannual MDA coverage reaching at least 85% of the eligible population in > 95% of treatment rounds during the 12-year period, 2000–2011. Serial parasitological testing to monitor MDA impact in sentinel villages showed a decrease in microfilaria skin prevalence from 70% to 0%, and polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based entomological assessments of the principal vector *Simulium ochraceum* s.l. showed transmission interruption by 2007. These assessments, together with a 2010 serological survey in children 9–69 months of age that showed Ov16 IgG4 antibody prevalence to be < 0.1%, meeting World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines for stopping MDA, and treatment was halted after 2011. After 3 years an entomological assessment showed no evidence of vector infection or recrudescence of transmission. In 2015, 100 years after the discovery of its presence, the Ministry of Health of Guatemala declared onchocerciasis transmission as having been eliminated from the CEZ.

**INTRODUCTION**

Human onchocerciasis (river blindness) is caused by *Onchocerca volvulus*, a tissue-dwelling filarial nematode transmitted by certain species of the genus *Simulium*. Adult male and female worms form fibrous, often palpable, subcutaneous onchocercomas (“nodules”), in which fertilized female worms produce microfilariae (mf). The mf leave the nodule and reside in the dermis. They may also enter the eyes. Human disease results largely from death of the mf, which results in inflammation, itching, visual impairment, and blindness. The *Simulium* ("black fly") vectors breed in rapidly flowing rivers and streams and become infected when they ingest mf during a blood meal; in competent black fly species, mf develop into third stage larvae that can infect humans when the vector takes a subsequent blood meal. There are no important animal reservoirs of *O. volvulus* to maintain the transmission cycle independent of the human population itself.

Human onchocerciasis is thought to have originated in Africa when *Onchocerca* species in ungulates adapted to man; the parasite is believed to have been brought to the Americas through the Atlantic slave trade. Transmission was only focally established in the Americas, in contrast to the extensive transmission zones that exist in Africa. In the Americas, due to a limited distribution of competent vectors, transmission zones (“foci”) are small and sharply delimited geographically, and are generally maintained by high vector biting rates. Before control measures were implemented, there were 13 foci in six countries in Latin America (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Venezuela), with an overall human population at risk in 2013 of just over 500,000 persons. Guatemala accounts for the largest at risk population for onchocerciasis in the Americas (231,467, representing about 41% of the total at risk regional population). The infection is transmitted by *Simulium ochraceum* s.l., which breeds at an altitude between 500 and 1,500 m in small streams and their tributaries. Guatemala has four foci: Santa Rosa (in the province of Santa Rosa), Huehuetenango (in the province of Huehuetenango), Escuintla-Guatemala (parts of the provinces of Escuintla and Guatemala), and the Central Endemic Zone (CEZ) (parts of the provinces of Suchitepéquez, Sololá, and Chimaltenango). The CEZ (Figure 1) is the largest of the four foci in terms of population (126,430, or 55% of Guatemala’s population at risk), and intensity of transmission. Of historical interest, the CEZ was the first onchocerciasis endemic area to be described in the Americas, discovered 100 years ago (1915) by the famed Guatemalan researcher, Rodolfo Robles Valverde. It was Robles’ work in the CEZ that first described the relationship between the *O. volvulus* infection, nodule rates, and ocular disease, and gave rise to human onchocerciasis in this hemisphere being referred to as “Robles’ Disease.”

To control onchocerciasis, the Guatemalan Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare (MSPAS, in its Spanish acronym) established a “Department of Robles’ Disease” in the mid-1930s (the current name is “Subprograma de Oncocercosis”). Although vector control was done in Escuintla-Guatemala for a short time, the primary activity of the MSPAS against onchocerciasis consisted of sending “noduleectomy brigades” to the four endemic areas to provide outreach surgical services. The most systematic and sustained nodulectomy activities were in the CEZ. Within 1 year of the 1987 Merck donation of the oral microfilaricidal medicine ivermectin (Mectizan)
Merck & Co., Whitehouse Station, NJ) to treat onchocerciasis, these brigades initiated mass drug administration (MDA) in parts of the CEZ; in 1990, the MSPAS adopted MDA, with related health education, as the primary intervention for all onchocerciasis-endemic areas of the country.10

In this report, we review the history of the CEZ MDA program and the monitoring and evaluation activities that led to a 2015 declaration that transmission of O. volvulus had been eliminated, based on fulfillment of the 2001 World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines for elimination of onchocerciasis.11

METHODS

The central endemic zone. The CEZ is found in the highlands south of Lake Atitlán in contiguous parts of three provinces: Sololá, Suchitepéquez, and Chimaltenango (Figure 1). The area is largely populated by people of Mayan Indian descent who make their living by working on large coffee or tea estates (finca).6,10 There are 321 endemic communities in the CEZ, with a total population at risk of onchocerciasis during the last year of MDA (in 2011) calculated to be 124,498, and a treatment eligible population (which excludes pregnant women and children under 5 years of age) of 112,338 persons. Over 90% of the population and communities are in two provinces: Suchitepéquez and Chimaltenango (Table 1).

History of MDA in the CEZ. A cumulative total of 2.9 million directly observed ivermectin treatments were delivered by the MSPAS’s CEZ MDA program during the period 1988–2011. Figure 2 shows the CEZ treatment coverage (top panel) of the eligible population by treatment round (top panel) and total treatments by year (bottom panel). The MDA program began in 1988 as a pilot study in some of the most affected CEZ communities.12,13 A MSPAS “decentralization” policy that moved onchocerciasis operations from the central to provincial levels in the 1990s resulted in major challenges sustaining the MDA strategy; MDA was intermittent, and data reporting was spotty, with no treatments reported for 1991, 1993, and 1995.

The regional Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas (OEPA) was established with support from the River Blindness Foundation in 1993 in response to the 1991 Resolution 35:14 of the Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) that called for the elimination of onchocerciasis morbidity from the Americas by 2007.14 OEPA (with its headquarters in Guatemala City) together with other partners, began to provide sustained technical and financial support for the MSPAS MDA program in 1994,15 and by 1996 annual MDA rounds were established in the CEZ. In 2000, the MSPAS made its policy to provide

![Figure 1](image)

FIGURE 1. This map of Guatemala shows the three provinces (Sololá, Suchitepéquez, and Chimaltenango) that contribute to the Central Endemic Zone (CEZ) for onchocerciasis in Guatemala. The CEZ (dark polygon) indicates the contiguous parts of the provinces where onchocerciasis transmission took place, just south of Lake Atitlán, in the highlands at elevations from 500 to 1500 m.

![Figure 2](image)

FIGURE 2. The top panel shows the Central Endemic Zone (CEZ) treatment percent coverage of the eligible population during the years 1988–2011, by treatment round (dark bars first round, light bars second round). The horizontal line indicates the coverage goal of ≥ 85% per round. The bottom panel shows single bars representing the total treatments provided by year (the bars represent the sum of treatments given during the year in those years when two rounds were given). Mass drug administration (MDA) was halted in 2012 after over 2.9 million cumulative treatments had been delivered over the period.
semiannual (every 6 months) MDA in all endemic communities in the CEZ, and to stop routine nodulectomy campaigns. The treatment program provided “effective” coverage (e.g., directly observed treatment of ≥ 85% of the eligible population) from 2000 to 2011 (Figure 2, top panel) in 23 (96%) of the 24 MDA rounds. A 2008 unpublished interview survey conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Kim Lindblade, CDC, unpublished data) confirmed the veracity of the program’s reported coverage statistics. Based on the assessments conducted in 2009–2011 reported in this article, the MDA was halted in 2012 and a 3-year posttreatment surveillance (PTS) period was launched. PTS ended in 2014 with the successful completion of an entomological survey, following OEAF recommendations.

**Parasitological, ophthalmological, and entomological evaluations in sentinel villages.** The impact of the program on onchocerciasis in the CEZ was monitored over time by epidemiological and entomological assessments conducted in nine sentinel villages (SVs). SVs were selected from among the most highly endemic communities for onchocerciasis; the strategy was to monitor the program in communities that had the greatest force of transmission, as these represented the “worst case scenario” for achieving transmission interruption. Five SVs were in Suchitepéquez, three in Chimaltenango, and one in Sololá (Table 2). The earliest (1981) pre-MDA SV baseline mf and ophthalmology data used in this report were for the SVs Santa Isabel, Los Tarrales, and Vesubio, from a publication by Brandling-Bennett and others.

**Parasitological evaluations.** Superficial skin biopsies (“snips”) were obtained from those who were ≥ 5 years old and who had resided in the community for at least the last 5 years. Using a 2.0-mm corneoscleral biopsy punch, a snip was taken from each scapular region, as described by Brandling-Bennett and others. The snips were incubated overnight in a saline solution and the fluid then examined microscopically for mf. Results are reported as number of persons positive for mf divided by number of persons examined.

**Ophthalmological evaluations.** Slit lamp examinations were conducted by an experienced ophthalmologist in residents ≥ 7 years old and who had resided in the community for at least the last 5 years. The indicator used was the presence of mf in the anterior chamber (MfAC). Examinations were conducted in a darkened area after the patients were asked to sit with their head between their legs for 5 minutes. Results are reported as number of persons positive for MfAC divided by number of persons examined.

**Entomological evaluations.** Polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based entomological monitoring was not launched until 2002, 2 years after the MDA program achieved full geographic and effective treatment coverage with the semiannual MDA strategy. Vector collections took place from November to April (the peak S. ochraceum s.l. biting season in the CEZ) using the method described by Lindblade and others in 2001–2002, 2006–2007, 2009–2010, 2010–2011, and 2012–2013. In this report, we will use the convention of naming the transmission season by the last year of vector collections (i.e., 2001–2002 will be called the 2002 transmission season).

**Simulium ochraceum** s.l. seeking a blood meal were collected in the SV being studied on at least 2 days/month. Two teams rotated between two collection sites (one in the fields and the other near houses) in each SV. Each team consisted of a collector and paid attractant, the latter being a resident of the SV and ≥ 18 years of age. The task of the collector was to capture the vectors from the attractant’s exposed back using an aspirator. Black flies were collected just after landing and before taking a blood meal. The attractants provided informed consent to participate and were given ivermectin 1 month before starting collections and 1 month after their completion. They also had Ov16 antibody blood tests (see below) prior to and again after completion of the collections. Collections started between 8:00 and 11:00 AM and ended at 5:00 PM. They took place for 50 minutes each hour, with workers taking 10-minute breaks at the end of every hour and a 1 hour break at noon.

The final entomological evaluations during the MDA phase in the CEZ were conducted over two transmission seasons (2010 and 2011) and the data from these two seasons were combined in the analysis. Based on the negative results from these evaluations, and the serological studies, (described below) MDA was halted at the end of 2011. PTS entomological collections took place from November 2013 to April 2014.

At the laboratory, S. ochraceum s.l. heads were separated from thoraces/abdomen (“bodies”). Head and body “pools,” having up to 50 heads or 50 bodies per tube, were kept separated by SV, site (field or house), hour, day, and month of collection. The bodies were analyzed first, using the standard O-150 PCR assay to detect *O. volvulus* deoxyribonucleic acid

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**Table 2**

Baseline and final microfilaria prevalences in skin and anterior chamber of the eye, CEZ, Guatemala

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>SV</th>
<th>Microfilaria in skin</th>
<th>Microfilaria in the eye</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prevalence</td>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solola</td>
<td>Santiago Atitlan</td>
<td>El Brote</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Santa Barbara</td>
<td>Los Andes</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Patulud</td>
<td>Vesubio</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>Santa Isabel</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>Tarrales</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chimaltenango</td>
<td>San Miguel Pochuta</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acatanengo</td>
<td>Buena Vista</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Pedro Yepocapa</td>
<td>La Estrellita</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CEZ = central endemic zone; SV = sentinel village.

The latitude and longitude locations of the SVs were El Brote (14°33′26″, −91°16′34″), Monte Carlo (14°33′0″, −91°16′49″), Los Andes (14°31′37″, −91°11′25″), Costa Rica (14°30′35″, −91°5′24″), Buena Vista (14°31′20″, −91°1′53″), La Estrellita (14°28′31″, −91°2′52″), Vesubio (14°32′40″, −91°9′41″), Santa Isabel (14°32′44″, −91°9′14″), Tarrales (14°31′18″, −91°8′14″). Shown are the results of baseline and final assessment parasitological evaluations (superficial skin biopsies (“snips”) for mf prevalence and slit lamp ophthalmological examinations in residents by an experienced ophthalmologist for presence of microfilariae (mf) in the anterior chamber (MfAC).
(DNA).19,20 Pools that were PCR positive were confirmed by a second PCR. If a positive body pool was confirmed, then all the head pools from that community for that transmission season were tested. However, if all body pools were negative, then the head pools from that community were not tested, based on the fact that bodies (containing first stage larvae [L1] and second stage larvae [L2]) are 4–5 times more likely than heads (containing third stage larvae [L3]) to have parasite stages.21

Serological evaluation. A serosurvey was conducted from a representative sample of young children to determine the CEZ prevalence of IgG4 antibodies to the *O. volvulus* recombinant antigen Ov-16.22 WHO guidelines for elimination require an infection rate of < 0.1% in children under 5 years of age, and to satisfy this requirement, a sample of at least 3,000 was needed to determine a one-sided 95% confidence interval (CI) that excluded 0.1%. Assuming a 20% refusal rate to participate, we determined a target sample of 3,800. Study communities were selected from among the 321 communities under the MDA program. Independent sampling was performed in each of the three provinces (Sololá, Suchitepéquez, and Chimaltenango; Table 1) in accord with the different sizes of the populations at risk in each province, with 89% of the children sampled being from Suchitepéquez and Chimaltenango. Communities in each province were ordered at random and the number of young children under 5 years of age likely to be in those communities estimated based on the latest census data and standard population pyramids for rural Guatemala. A skip interval was calculated, and a random number was chosen to determine in which community on the list the skip interval calculations would begin to be applied. The community selections continued along the skip interval until the necessary number of children for sample for the given province was reached.

The sample communities were visited and the purpose of the blood study was explained in community meetings. In those meetings it was stressed that it was the right of each individual and their parents to decide whether to participate and that the results of the tests would be provided on request. Written, informed consent/assent was obtained from the parents or guardians of all participant children. Blood was obtained from children reported to be 9 months of age and that the results of the tests would be provided on individual and their parents to decide whether to participate, as well as the number of children under 5 years of age with nodules. Unfortunately, the total number of children under 5 years who were examined was not available, so a nodule rate among children who presented for examination could not be calculated.

Analysis. Critical thresholds were based on the 2001 WHO Guidelines for Elimination of Onchocerciasis, as adapted by OEPA: 1) interruption of transmission—infection in vectors; an upper bound of the 95% CI of the prevalence of flies carrying infective larvae of < 1 infective fly/2,000, upper bound of the 95% CI of the seasonal transmission potential (STP) of < 20 L3/person/transmission season, and upper bound of the 95% CI of infection rates in young children of < 0.1%; 2) elimination of morbidity—MIAC of the eye at a level where the upper bound of the 95% CI of < 1%; and 3) elimination of transmission—3 years after stopping MDA (the PTS phase) infection in vectors remains at a level where the upper bound of the 95% CI is < 1 infective fly/2,000 and the upper bound of the 95% CI of the STP remains < 20 L3/person/transmission season.11,16,18,19

The one-sided 95% CIs for the prevalence were calculated using the SAS (version 9.0; SAS Institute, Cary, NC) FREQ procedure with the EXACT statement, BINOMIAL option, and an alpha level of 0.10. Entomological data were analyzed using the Poolscreen 2.0 program, which was used to calculate the proportion of infective flies based on the number of positive pools and the associated 95% CIs.20,25,26 Biting rates STPs were calculated as described by Lindblade and others.19 Overall means reported for SVs were an average of the mean infection rate for each SV, in a given survey year.

Ethics. Before their execution, the surveys reported herein received appropriate review by the MSPAS, the UVG, the CDC, and Emory University, and were considered as program evaluation necessary in the monitoring of a public health program. Written, informed consent was obtained from all participants over 18 years of age, and from the parents or guardians of all participant children between 12 and 18 years of age. Children under 12 required parental assent. Fly attractants, who were residents of the SVs and so routinely exposed to vector bites in their daily activities, were paid for their time: they were read or had read to them a consent form and indicated their willingness to participate as attractants with their signature or fingerprint.

RESULTS

Parasitological evaluations. Between 1981 and 2010, there were 47 community visits for skin snip evaluations to determine mf prevalence in the nine SVs of the CEZ (mean: 5.2 assessments

Archival review. After the survey and laboratory work was completed, the communities selected for the serosurvey were compared with available MSPAS records from community level nodulectomy brigade visits over the 11-year pre-MDA period (1980–1990) before ivermectin MDA was widely introduced.24 The data consisted of convenience samples of community residents who presented themselves to MSPAS staff for a palpation examination for onchocercomas. Many of these persons were undoubtedly “self-selected” (as were their children) for examination, believing that they had nodules that needed to be removed by the brigadistas. Data included the date of the visit, the number of persons examined, the number of persons with nodules, and numbers of children under 5 years of age with nodules (as an indicator of recent incidence). Data from all visits to a sample community over the period were summed to give a single value for pre-MDA “convenience sample/self-section” community nodule rate (number of persons with nodules divided by number of persons examined), as well as the number of children under 5 years of age with nodules. Unfortunately, the total number of children under 5 years who were examined was not available, so a nodule rate among children who presented for examination could not be calculated.

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RESULTS

Parasitological evaluations. Between 1981 and 2010, there were 47 community visits for skin snip evaluations to determine mf prevalence in the nine SVs of the CEZ (mean: 5.2 assessments
per SV, range: 4–6). Figure 3 (top panel) depicts the decrease over time of skin snip prevalence that was first observed after the MDA program reached sustained and effective coverage. Table 2 shows the results of initial baseline (1981–1994) and final (2007–2010) skin snip assessments, by SV. The mean SV baseline mf prevalence (obtained prior to the launching of MDA) was 70% (range 36–90%) for the nine SVs. In the final SV skin snip assessments (based on the examination of 1,032 individuals) no mf positives were found.

**Ophthalmological evaluations.** Between 1981 and 2010, there were 19 community visits for ophthalmological evaluations for onchocerciasis in the nine SVs of the CEZ (mean: 2.1 assessments per SV; range: 2–3). Figure 3 (bottom panel) shows the decrease over time of MfAC prevalence. Table 2 shows the results of baseline (1981–2003) and final (2007–2008) MfAC assessments in the nine SVs of the CEZ, by SV. The mean SV baseline MfAC prevalence was 12.1% (range 0–39%). In the final slit lamp assessments in the SVs, a total of 857 persons were examined; a single person with MfAC was found in Los Tarrales, resulting in a 0.5% prevalence for that community, and a 0.1% overall MfAC prevalence (with a one-sided 95% CI of 0–0.6%).

**Entomological evaluations.** A total of four entomological field exercises were conducted during transmission seasons 2002, 2007, 2010–2011 (years combined), and the 2014 PTS period. These exercises consisted of a total of 6,023 person-collecting hours over 351 days during the peak *S. ochraceum* s.l. biting season of those collection years. Table 3 and its footnote summarize the number of SVs, collection sites, and months of vector collection activities.

A total of 328,575 vectors were collected and tested by PCR for *O. volvulus* DNA. Table 4 shows a summary of PCR PoolScreen results. The trend of the 95% upper CIs of key indices (< 1 infective fly/2,000 vectors and STP < 20 L3/person/transmission season) over the entomological monitoring period in the CEZ is shown in Figure 4. In 2002, 2 years into the full coverage MDA program, the point estimate for the prevalence of flies carrying infective larvae was 1.02/2,000 (95% CI: 0.8–1.60/2,000; Table 4 and Figure 4 top panel), and the upper 95% CI for the STP was 24.4 (mean 15.6, 95% CI: 12.2–24.4; Table 4 and Figure 4, bottom panel), both indicative of being right at the threshold of interrupting transmission by WHO/OEPA criteria. By 2007 (5 years and 10 MDA treatment rounds later), the upper 95% CIs for both the infective rate per 2,000 flies (0.06) and STP (1.0) were below the transmission interruption thresholds. The final entomological evaluations for the CEZ MDA phase in 2010–2011 were similarly below the thresholds, with the upper bound of the 95% upper CI of the vector infective rate of 0.12/2,000 flies and the STP was 0 with an upper bound of the 95% upper CI of 2.6. These results, taken together with results from the serological evaluations (described below) led to a MSPAS decision to stop MDA. During PTS entomological surveillance, PCR results from testing over 119,000 flies collected from November 2013 to April 2014 showed no evidence of recrudescence of transmission: 0 infection in the vectors (95% upper CI of 0.03/2,000 flies) and 0 STP (95% upper confidence of 1.1 L3/person/transmission season). The five SVs involved in the PTS evaluation included La Estrellita, Montecarlo, El Brote, Santa Isabel, and Vesubio. An additional non-sentinel village (Nueva Providencia, located in San Lucas Toliman, Solola) that was known to have been hyperendemic prior to MDA was included in the entomological assessment, as a “spot check.”

**2010 Serological evaluation.** Our study design aimed to select 3,800 children with an estimate that we would have a 20% refusal rate; we sampled 3,417 (90% of our target) in 29 communities: 2,171 (63% of sampled children) were from 15 (52% of the sampled) communities in Suchitepequez; 878 (26%) children in 12 (41%) communities in Chimaltenango (including children from La Estrellita, the only SV randomly selected in the sample); and 368 (11%) children in 2 (7%) communities in Solola (Table 5). All 3,417 children were negative in ELISA testing for Ov16 IgG4 (0% prevalence, upper 95% CI: 0.08%), thus satisfying the WHO guideline that 5-year cumulative prevalence rates in young children should be < 0.1% to demonstrate interruption of *O. volvulus* transmission. The median age of the children tested was 36 months (range 9–69 months).

**Archival review.** Past (pre-MDA) MSPAS convenience sample/self-selection nodule data were available for 22

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**Decrease of microfilaria prevalence in skin and anterior chamber of the eye over time in 9 Sentinel Villages, CEZ Guatemala, 1981-2010**

![Figure 3](image-url)

*Figure 3.* The top panel shows the results from 47 sentinel village (SV) visits between 1981 and 2010 for skin snip evaluations to determine microfilariae (mf) prevalence in the nine SVs of the Central Endemic Zone (CEZ). Each village was visited between four and six times (mean: 5.2 assessments per SV). The graphic only shows positive results. Zero skin mf prevalence was first observed in 2007 and occurred in Buena Vista, Costa Rica, Los Andes, and Tarrales. In 2010, mf prevalence was zero in El Brote, Buena Vista, La Estrellita, Montecarlo, Santa Isabel, Tarrales, and Vesubio. The bottom panel shows similar data for fewer (19) SV visits for ophthalmological evaluations to determine mf prevalence in the anterior chamber (MfAC); note that Monte Carlo and El Brote baseline are mf in cornea, not MfAC. Each of the nine SVs of the CEZ was visited at least twice (range 2–3). Zero values MfAC was recorded in 2007 in El Brote, Buena Vista, Costa Rica, La Estrellita, Los Andes, and Monte Carlo. In 2009, MfAC was zero in Santa Isabel and Vesubio. One individual (0.5%) was positive in Tarrales in 2009. See text and Table 2 for additional SV information.
he specialized in “colonial medicine,” a field focused on malaria, public health, and microbiology. After his return to Guatemala, he maintained a keen research interest in tropical pathology, and in 1915 encountered an 8-year-old patient with a subcutaneous nodule in which Robles discovered the adult worms of *O. volvulus*. He subsequently dedicated much of his research to the study of the transmission, clinical pathology, and epidemiology of this parasite, and most importantly established for the first time that onchocerciasis was linked to visual loss. Food later awarded him the Legion of Honor. The highest medical award of Guatemala is named in his honor, as is an ophthalmological hospital in Guatemala City.

The CEZ is the largest transmission zone (focus) of onchocerciasis in Guatemala, and with a population at risk of 124,498, is larger than the other three Guatemalan foci combined. The CEZ also has the largest at risk population of the 13 onchocerciasis foci in the Americas, comprising 22% of the 565,232 persons originally at risk for contracting the disease. It is followed in size by the south Chiapas focus in Mexico (with 117,825 persons at risk, or 21% of the regional total) and the northeast focus of Venezuela (95,567 persons at risk, 17%). Together these three foci account for 60% of the population at risk in the Americas. MDA has been halted in all three of these foci but only south Chiapas and the CEZ have completed PTS. Overall, MDA has been stopped in 11 of the 13 American foci; the only active MDA program for onchocerciasis in the Americas at this time is in a cross-border focus (shared by Brazil and Venezuela) in the Amazon jungle. The difficult to access indigenous Amerindian population (the Yanomami) who are targeted for treatment in this area comprise only 5% of the population in the Americas originally targeted for MDA.

The roadmap for establishing the elimination of onchocerciasis in Guatemala used the WHO guidelines published in 2001, as modified for field operations and observations and conditions reported by Lindblade and OEPA. The modified guidelines have been successfully used by independent verification teams.
achieving 6 month) treatment rounds in all affected communities, each
OEPA strategy of providing at least semiannual (every
... exposed, MDA under this strategy would then need
to suppress, MDA under this strategy would then need
from infecting the vector. With the transmission cycle
Americas was therefore based on using ivermectin to keep
the adult
potent oral microfilaricidal drug, is not immediately lethal to
these studies. An important challenge was that ivermectin, a
eligibles) coverage, was based largely on the findings from

FIGURE 4. The two graphs show the upper 95% confidence inter-
vals for vector infectivity and for annual transmission potential in sen-
tinel villages as calculated by PoolScreen. Horizontal lines indicate the
breakpoint thresholds (< 1/2,000 cutoff for vector infectivity and < 20
for seasonal transmission potential [STP]) below which onchocerciasis
transmission is not possible. Data are based on the examination of
328,575 vectors in 4,616 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) reactions
(pools): 46,160 vectors in 835 pools in 2002, 67,808 flies in 1,260 pools
in 2007, 95,306 flies in 1,836 pools in 2010–2011, and 119,301 flies in
685 pools in 2014.

(IVTs), sent under the auspices of the WHO Neglected Tropi-
cal Disease Department to verify the elimination of onchocerc-
ciasis in Colombia in 201330 and Ecuador in 2014.31 In this
process, an IVT country visit is undertaken after the
submission by a ministry of health of a detailed dossier that
provides evidence that all foci in the country have eliminated
O. volvulus transmission. In Guatemala, the elimination process
has already been completed and published in peer-reviewed
journals for three of the four of its onchocerciasis foci: Santa Rosa,19
Escuintla-Guatemala,32 and Huehuetenango.33
Based on the completion of elimination evaluations in the
CEZ, as reported herein, Guatemala submitted its dossier to
WHO in 2015, along with a request for an IVT visit.

In the 1990s, several key studies seeking to determine how
to best use ivermectin MDA to break O. volvulus transmission
were conducted in the CEZ by MSPAS, CDC, the UVG, the
University of Arizona, and other partners.10,12,13,34 The
OEPA strategy of providing at least semiannual (every 6
month) treatment rounds in all affected communities, each
achieving “effective” (≥ 85% directly observed treatment of
eligibles) coverage, was based largely on the findings from
these studies. An important challenge was that ivermectin, a
potent oral microfilaricidal drug, is not immediately lethal to
the adult O. volvulus worms. The elimination strategy in the
Americas was therefore based on using ivermectin to keep
levels of mf in the human population low enough to prevent
them from infecting the vector. With the transmission cycle
so suppressed, MDA under this strategy would then need
to be given for the duration of the reproductive life of
remaining adult worms being exposed to the twice per year
doses of ivermectin. Cupp and Cupp estimated the reproductive
adult female worm life span under such intense ivermectin
exposure to be about 6.5 years.35 Adult male worms are
more sensitive to ivermectin than female worms, and perish
even more rapidly. Histological studies of nodules showed
fewer than 20% of nodules contained male worms and more
than 80% of female worms were unisminated and producing
unfertilized oocytes in populations where transmission was
broken and twice per year MDA was being provided.36
The entomological results from this study are worthy of
note. The first PCR-based entomological measurements did
not begin until 2002, 2 years into effective MDA delivery.
These early PCR results showed the infective rate and the
STP to be still above the breakpoint thresholds of an upper
bound of the 95% CI of < 1/2,000 and < 20 L3/person/trans-
mission season (Figure 4). We can estimate the pre-MDA
baseline using dissection data from two SVs. Collins and
others, working in the SV Los Tarrales from 1976 to 1977
found an S. ochraceum s.l. infective rate of 61/2,000, and an
STP of 174 L3/person.35 Cupp and others, working in the SV
Los Andes in 1988, reported a pre-MDA STP of 108 L3/person.13
If the pre-MDA baseline STP was assumed to be the mean
value from these two studies (141 L3/person/season), then by
2 years into the effective MDA program, transmission had
been reduced by approximately 82% (from 141 to 24). By
2007, after 7 years and 14 MDA treatment rounds, the ento-
modal breakpoint thresholds had been achieved (with an
STP reduction from pre-MDA baseline of > 99%). Effective
MDA was continued for another 5 years (10 rounds) past
this point, at which time a total absence of Ov16 IgG4 antibody
reactivity was demonstrated in > 3,400 children under 5 years
of age. These children were sampled from randomly selected
communities within the CEZ that included known and
unknown endemic villages; in two of the known endemic villages,
children under 5 had had nodules noted by the MSPAS brigades
in the pre-MDA era. The serological results confirmed the
2007 and 2011 entomological data that there had been no
parasite transmission for at least 5 years. During the PTS
entomological surveillance, PCR results from testing over
119,000 flies in sentinel, as well as an extra sentinel village,
showed no evidence of recrudescence of transmission or of
human–parasite vector contact. These PTS entomological
results are strong evidence that the adult O. volvulus worms
in the transmission zone were either absent, or at such a low
reproductive levels that the population could not recover.16
A decline in human onchocerciasis prevalence and intensity
of infection in the CEZ likely began before full coverage
with MDA was achieved in 2000. Any such decline in the
human population would have been accompanied by a
decrease in the force of transmission, although probably
insufficient to break transmission, especially in hyperendemic
areas. As noted above, the 2002 entomological assessment
conducted after only 2 years of full coverage twice per year
CEZ MDA showed both the prevalence in flies (with an
upper 95% CI of 1.60/2,000) and the STP (with an upper
95% CI of 24.4 L3/person/season) were just above the trans-
misison breakpoint as defined by the current WHO/OEPA
guidelines. The 2007 entomological evaluation, conducted
5 years later, was the first time that the breakpoint was docu-
menced to have been reached. However, it is highly likely that
transmission was broken much earlier than 2007, probably
within 2 years of the 2002 survey. Thus we believe the MDA program provided sufficient treatment (2004–2011) for the 6.5 year expected reproductive life span of adult *O. volvulus* female worms projected under twice per year ivermectin treatment pressure.35 Although there might have been a small risk with the halting MDA in 2012 (after only 5 years after documenting transmission interruption in 2007) that some adult female worms remained, we could find no evidence that there were sufficient reproductively active parasites to result in the resumption of transmission in the SVs where PTS was conducted. This could also have been due to the impact of MDA on the adult male worm population that appears more sensitive than *O. volvulus* females to recurrent twice yearly treatments.36

The success against onchocerciasis in the Americas is in large part due to a durable public–private partnership, embodied in OEPA, that includes the six endemic countries (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Venezuela), PAHO/WHO, The Carter Center, Merck and the Mectizan Donation Program, and many other partners. Annual meetings (the Inter-American Conferences on Onchocerciasis) of all partners have been held since 1991. A small secretariat for the OEPA, partnership, based in Guatemala City, provides technical, administrative, advocacy, and some financial support to national programs.15 The Carter Center has shouldered the administrative responsibilities for the secretariat for the last 20 years. A Program Coordinating Committee meets twice per year to act as the technical steering committee for OEPA. It reviews and approves the annual *Weekly Epidemiological Record* progress reports of the regional initiative that have been published by WHO since 1996. PAHO/WHO provided the initial 1991 and subsequent key regional resolutions to provide the political mandate behind the effort. In 2008, PAHO’s Directing Council renewed the call to eliminate onchocerciasis throughout the region in Resolution CD48. R12. The following year the Directing Council issued CD49. R19 that called for the elimination or control of 12 neglected infectious diseases of poverty in the Americas, which includes onchocerciasis elimination as one of its 2015 targets.4,14

In conclusion, we report the elimination of *O. volvulus* transmission from the CEZ in Guatemala, the largest focus of onchocerciasis in the Americas and the first to be discovered in this hemisphere by Rodolfo Robles in 1915. Elimination was achieved by a national program that delivered semiannual mass ivermectin administration reaching at least 85% of the eligible population over a 12-year period (2000–2011). Progress toward elimination was demonstrated through serial ocular, parasitological, and entomological surveys conducted in nine sentinel villages, as well as in a broad sampling of young children for Ov16 IgG4 antibody reactivity throughout the CEZ prior

### Table 5

Results of Ov16 IgG4 serological testing (2010) of young children, CEZ, Guatemala, together with historical (pre-MDA) nodule rates in the sampled communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>1980–1990 (Pre-MDA) nodule prevalence*</th>
<th>Number of children tested</th>
<th>Ov16 Pet positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suchitepéquez</td>
<td>Santa Barbara</td>
<td>Santa Adelaida</td>
<td>28†</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patulul</td>
<td>Santa Luisa</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan Bautista</td>
<td>Veracrúz</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Miguel Panan</td>
<td>Finca La Concha</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicacao</td>
<td>Concepción Chinan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Recuerdo</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finca Chinan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Los Mangales</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantón La Libertad</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandroía</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Lucía Pamaxan</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finca Baja Vista</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Pito</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,171 (63%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sololá</td>
<td>San Lucas Tolimán</td>
<td>Pampojilá</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Xejuyú</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>368 (11%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chimaltenango</td>
<td>San Miguel Pochuta</td>
<td>Finca El Recuerdo</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Finca Mirandilla</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acatenango</td>
<td>Finca Rafael Paúñ</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Finca Peña Plata</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Finca Santa Teresa</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Morelia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>La Estrellita</td>
<td>78†</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nueva Victoria</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>El Porvenir</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aldea La Cruz</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>878 (26%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,417 (0–0.08)†</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CEZ = Central Endemic Zone; MDA = mass drug administration; NA = data not available.

*1980–1990 (Pre-MDA) nodule rates are based on convenience samples, often among individuals who were self-selected based on their belief that they had a nodule, and are therefore not based on a statistically representative sample.

†Nodules found in children during the pre-MDA period.

‡Number in parenthesis, 95% confidence interval.
to stopping the MDA campaign. Three years after halting mass treatment an entomological assessment showed no evidence of vector infection. The Ministry of Health of Guatemala declared onchocerciasis transmission as having been eliminated from the CEZ 100 years after its discovery there by Robles.

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Authors’ addresses: Frank Richards Jr., River Blindness Program, The Carter Center, Atlanta, GA, E-mail: frank.richards@emory.edu. Nidia Rizzo, Renata Mendizabal de Cabrera, and Oscar de Leon, Centro de Estudios en Salud, Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, Guatemala, Guatemala, E-mails: nrizzo@ces.uvg.edu.gt, rmendizabal@ces.uvg.edu.gt, and odeleon@ces.uvg.edu.gt. Carlos Enrique Diaz Espinoza, Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social, Guatemala, Guatemala, E-mail: carlosenrique@hotmail.com. Zoraida Morales Monroy, Programa Nacional de Enfermedades Transmitidas por Vectores, Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social de Guatemala, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala, E-mail: zoraidamoralesmonroy@gmail.com. Carol Guillermina Crovella Valdez, Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social de Guatemala, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala, E-mail: crovellaval@gmail.com. Guillermo Zea-Flores, Guatemala, E-mail: gzeaflores@hotmail.com. Mauricio Sauerbrey, Alba Lucia Morales, Dahila Rios, and Alfredo Dominguez, Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas, Edificio Murano, Guatemala City, Guatemala, E-mails: msauercar@gmail.com, almores@oea.net, drios@oea.net, and adominguez59@hotmail.com. Thomas R. Unnasch and Hassan K. Hassan, Global Health Infectious Disease Program, Department of Global Health, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, E-mails: tunnasch@health.usf.edu and hhassan@health.usf.edu. Robert Klein, Medical Entomology Research and Training Unit/Guatemala Miami, FL, E-mail: rocklein46@gmail.com. Mark Eberhard, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA, E-mail: mle1@cdc.gov. Ed Cupp, Auburn University, Department of Entomology, Owensboro, KY, E-mail: cuppedd@auburn.edu.

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