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Cattle drug trial curbs sleeping sickness spread among people

Thousands of lives in Africa have been saved by an initiative to help eradicate sleeping sickness.

Cases of acute sleeping sickness among people in rural Uganda fell by 90 per cent after researchers prevented transmission to humans by eliminating the parasite from domestic cattle.

Researchers at the University of Edinburgh aim to extend the project to all of the districts in Uganda that are affected by acute sleeping sickness, treating approximately 2.7 million head of cattle.

The research initiative tested a new approach to sleeping sickness control by targeting 500,000 cows for treatment.

The condition, which is a parasitic infection affecting the nervous system, is always fatal if not treated.

Many sufferers are in the poorest rural areas with no access to treatment and are unaware of the risk to their health posed by infected livestock.

Researchers eliminated the trypanosome parasite that carries the disease by giving livestock a single injection of trypanocide and by carrying out regular insecticide spraying to prevent re-infection.

The results were achieved as part of the Stamp Out Sleeping Sickness (SoS) campaign, created in 2006 by the University of Edinburgh, the University of Makerere, IKARE, Ceva Sante Animale and the Government of Uganda.

SoS is estimated to have saved up to \$400 million (US) in human health care costs. It has also generated increased productivity of \$25 per head of cattle per year in these poor communities.

The study was named in the top 20 examples of UK further education institutions benefiting global development.

Ranked among the top universities in the world

The UK Centre of Development Science selected the project from almost 7000 case studies submitted to the Research Assessment Framework (REF) – the UK Government’s system for assessing the quality of UK research.

Backing for the project has come from the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), the European Union 7th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, IKARE and the Wellcome Trust.

Professor Sue Welburn, the University of Edinburgh's Vice-Principal Global Access, led the research and said: “For this neglected disease, treating the infection in cattle, the source of infection to humans offers us a double whammy, healthier people and healthier animals. By turning cows into deadly targets for tsetse flies, sleeping sickness is gradually being pushed out of communities”.

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