

Popularizing Philanthropy for Developing World Research:

Fighting Malaria in Africa Goes Democratic via Internet

***British entrepreneur, 25, created world's top soccer website;
now teams with leading global health professors to innovate in malaria philanthropy***

Public offered chance of involvement in African malaria research projects

Philanthropy just got easier and a lot more accessible to the public thanks to the social networking power of the Internet and a ground-breaking partnership between a young British entrepreneur, a global health think tank and an African medical research institute.

Debuted April 20 to offer individuals a meaningful way to mark World Malaria Day (Friday, April 25), its creators hope www.MalariaEngage.org will do for African research what YouTube did for sharing videos and what eBay did for trading things – open it up in a creative and engaging way to the vast global community through the World Wide Web.

At MalariaEngage.org, people can enlist directly in the anti-malaria battle by contributing \$10 or more to an initial choice of seven highly varied projects involving selected scientists in developing countries. Over time, new projects will replace those that reach their funding goal (the original seven have objectives ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000). The site features a discussion area where supporters can interact with researchers and each other, obtain news and photos of both funded and proposed projects, a running tally of money raised, and stories from the front lines in the war against the scourge of malaria.

Borne by mosquitos, malaria is a preventable disease that infects an estimated 515 million people yearly and kills between one and three million annually, the vast majority of them children in sub-Saharan Africa -- an estimated 3,000 child victims daily.

It is the leading cause of death in Tanzania, where the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) researchers proposed the initial suite of seven cutting-edge projects chosen to launch MalariaEngage.org.

The team behind MalariaEngage.org includes 25-year-old Tom Hadfield, a self-described “part-time student and full-time entrepreneur” who came to national attention in his native Britain when Soccer.net, a website he developed as a high school student in his bedroom, was sold at age 17 to ESPN for \$40 million.

Honoured as a Global Leader of Tomorrow by the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in 2001 and now studying at Harvard, Tom has parlayed his dot-com success and passion for launching entrepreneurial projects into innovative ways of tackling the planet's oldest and most intractable problems.

“It’s shocking that thousands of people are dying every day from a preventable disease,” says Hadfield. “When I came back from Africa last summer, a lot of people asked me what they can do to help.

“By encouraging individual participation and involvement, we will create international communities of common interest,” he says. “This is the essence of social networking – MalariaEngage.org connects people who want to help directly with researchers working in Africa on malaria prevention, treatment and capacity building projects. Everyone can help and I urge them to discover, learn, join, contribute, get results, share experiences and invite others to participate.”

Hadfield notes MalariaEngage.org will fit seamlessly into other social networking sites such as Facebook, whose users can add malaria research projects as a “cause” on their profile, join groups of project supporters, and communicate with others dedicated to helping eradicate malaria.

“When we tap into all that energy and creativity to promote and raise funds for malaria research projects, not just in Tanzania but elsewhere in Africa and the developing world, who knows what might be achieved?”

Hadfield co-founded MalariaEngage.org with leading global health professors Peter A. Singer and Abdallah S. Daar at Canada’s McLaughlin-Rotman Centre for Global Health at University Health Network and University of Toronto (MRC), the project’s lead partner.

Says Dr. Singer, MD: “Everyone recognizes that one of the most significant ethical challenges facing the world today is the inequity in global health. Life expectancy in industrialized countries is 80 years and rising; whilst in many African countries it is 40 years and falling. The key ethical value underlying efforts to do something about these inequities is solidarity.

“Many young people in the US, Canada, Europe and other industrialized countries feel a sense of solidarity with kids in Africa, but there is not much they can do to act on this ethical intuition. MalariaEngage.org was designed to give them a channel to do something in practice about that ethical value of solidarity, to mobilize a vast untapped pool of support – not just to raise funds but also to create a worldwide community of people committed to changing the face of global health,” he says.

“Imagine a world where like-minded people in the US, Canada, Europe and other industrialized nations are tightly connected in efforts to find solutions to malaria – one of the great, and unnecessary, plagues affecting humankind.”

According to Dr. Daar, MD: “Malaria is an ongoing global health catastrophe that must be addressed by empowering researchers in the developing world to find solutions to their countries’ own problems through creative, properly capitalized research programs.

Tapping the talent and motivation of developing country scientists is critical if we're going to win this fight.”

If this initial proof of concept is successful, MalariaEngage.org will scale up by involving other African-based institutions fighting malaria, he adds.

Detailed descriptions of the seven malaria research projects that require funding are available at www.malariaengage.org.

The McLaughlin-Rotman Centre for Global Health, Program on Life Sciences, Ethics and Policy is based at the University Health Network and the University of Toronto. Created in 2001 and led by Professors Abdallah Daar and Peter A. Singer, the program works at the nexus of life sciences, the developing world and entrepreneurship, using scholarly research to help move health technologies from “lab to the village.” For more information: www.mrcglobal.org