

# Eye on the cure: Dr. Frank Richards

Dr. Frank Richards enjoyed 12 months of incremental victories and one personal setback since The Atlanta Journal-Constitution wrote in January about his war on a devastating health threat.

Richards is the Carter Center's field general in the battle against river blindness, a horrible tropical illness carried by biting black flies. And incremental is the only available measure of success when fighting an enemy spread across thousands of isolated villages, often in war-torn or ungoverned areas.

The disease afflicts people in the Americas and Africa, but victory drew nearer in the West in 2014 thanks to Richards' strategy, which involves killing and sterilizing the parasitic worms that cause the disease by administering multiple drug treatments to sufferers and potential victims.

The last 12 months also saw a major loss for Richards. His father, Dr. Frank O. Richards Sr., died in February. Called "the Jackie Robinson of the surgical profession" by a colleague, Frank Sr. provided inspiration and a role model for his son, who he instructed to dream big, do something with your life and take on challenges.

A year ago, Personal Journeys documented Frank Jr.'s decades-long obsession with eliminating river blindness by traveling with him into the



Dr. Frank Richards pauses with Carter Center staff for afternoon coffee in Gendwuha, Ethiopia. Richards' strategy to eliminate river blindness in Africa has resulted in incremental victories. The proposed eradication date for the illness is 2025 for the continent. CHRISTOPHER QUINN/CQUINN@AJC.COM

back country of Ethiopia. The battle continues to show slow but thrilling results.

In September the World Health Organization confirmed Ecuador as the second country in the Western Hemisphere to kill off the disease after Colombia. Mexico and Guatemala are in a three-year waiting period to be certified disease-free.

Richards' leadership has reduced river blindness in the West to one spot in the Amazon jungle on the border of Brazil and Venezuela.

Last year Richards predicted the disease would be eliminated in the West in 2015. Now he's adjusted that projection slightly.

"It was pretty aspirational to get it done by 2015 in the

Americas," he says. "It's not bad to say we made 95 percent of it."

Now the Carter Center and its allies, such as the Lions Clubs International, are spreading Richards' strategy to Africa, where the fight is tougher.

The disease is more entrenched, the insects more efficient at transporting it, and



the number of people subject to it near 120 million. That could add up to a billion doses of Mectizan, the parasite-killing and prophylactic drug made and donated by Merck.

The eradication date has been proposed as 2025 in Africa. That would put Richards past 70 years old. His father lived to 90. Richards is confident.

"This is the road map to get to the end of the road," he said.

It will be a long one in Africa.

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