

JUST CAUSES

Positive Strokes

Will you join the World Swim for Malaria? BY STUART HUSBAND

THE TERM “making a splash” will acquire a whole new meaning later this year, when the biggest charity swim ever staged will attempt to raise millions of dollars to fight malaria, one of the world’s leading causes of children’s deaths.

Since its launch last December, World Swim for Malaria (WSM), at this writing, has already signed up close to 120,000 volunteers around the world from Caracas to Kathmandu — schools, clubs, companies, friends and former Olympic champions — to take the plunge this December 3. The eventual aim, says the campaign’s coordinator, Rob Mather, is to get 1 million people swimming. “There will be something special about knowing you’re swimming on the same day as many others across the world,” he says.

Mather’s sense of urgency is understandable, given the stark statistics. The number of children who die from malaria each day would fill seven jumbo jets. Approximately 40 percent of the world’s pop-

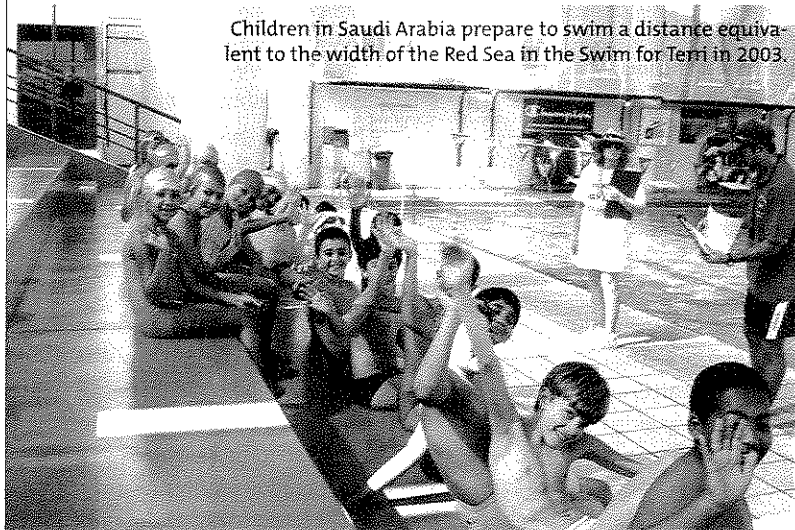
ulation is at risk of malaria, which causes acute illness in 300 million people each year and, by some estimates, as many as 2.7 million deaths. Ninety percent of malaria deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa,

in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and Zambia. Seventy percent of those deaths are of children under 5. “Yet malaria is completely preventable,” says Mather passionately.

How? With insecticide-treated sleep nets to protect people in malaria-prone areas from mosquito bites that can transmit the disease. Newly developed nets that keep their insecticidal properties for

from eight days to several months, during which the disease is still treatable. Unfortunately, many malaria parasites have developed drug resistance, and carrier mosquitoes are resistant to several common insecticides. There is no vaccine against malaria.

The first symptoms of the disease are chills and fevers lasting several hours and occurring every three to four days; this is followed by enlargement of the spleen



Children in Saudi Arabia prepare to swim a distance equivalent to the width of the Red Sea in the Swim for Tern in 2003.

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ulation is at risk of malaria, which causes acute illness in 300 million people each year and, by some estimates, as many as 2.7 million deaths. Ninety percent of malaria deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa,

up to five years are even more effective.

The bite of an infected anopheles mosquito transmits parasites that attack the red blood cells, liver and immune system. The parasites “incubate” in the body

and liver, then by anemia and jaundice. That anemia, clogging of the blood vessels or general debilitation can become fatal.

The sleep nets, which cost about US\$5 each, are an effective preventive measure because the malaria-transmitting mosquito feeds at night, and is therefore most active between dusk and dawn.

“All the money we raise will go on bed nets, and we will make sure that they are installed,” says Mather. “It’s very simple,

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWIM FOR TERN

and it will make an enormous and quantifiable difference. . . . If we swim, we save lives. Malaria is born in water, so here's our chance to kill it in water."

WSM may have big ambitions, but it's not at all splashy. You'll search in vain for TV telethons, all-star gigs in enormodomes, rainbow bracelets, celebrity endorsements. WSM is run by Mather out of his West London living room, and it relies heavily on Internet word of mouth to gen-

erate buzz. "We understand that people have charity appeals coming at them from all directions," says Mather. "But I've discovered that you can be just as effective in getting people to rally for a cause if you fly a little below the radar."

In his efforts to make WSM the daddy of all sporting fund-raisers, he stresses that participants don't have to stick to the "official" day, or any other hard-and-fast rule. "We're suggesting that a group sets a col-

lective target of 35 kilometers [21.7 miles], because . . . that's the distance across the English Channel," he says. "But you decide how far you want to go, how many of you there are, and all of that." The same goes for the monetary goal of each group; Mather suggests that each set its own target for fund-raising—perhaps enough for 10 or 100 or 1,000 nets, depending on the size of the swim team. "We don't want to be prescriptive; we want people to have fun," he says. "The most important thing is just to get people committed to this."

Despite his protestations ("I'm a private person . . . this thing is far bigger than me"), Mather, 40, is the driving force behind WSM—a wiry, intense man with a passionate zeal. His fund-raising activities began two years ago when he watched a British TV documentary about a 2-year-old girl named Terri Calvesbert who'd suffered 90 percent burns in a house fire. "It was the most moving story I'd seen in years," he says. "She had these terrible injuries; she'd lost a foot, both hands . . . the

Forward in Five Years

Global organizations have been swatting at malaria since 1998 in the form of the **Roll Back Malaria Partnership**. This coordinated effort, led by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank, aims to halve the burden of malaria by 2010.

RBM defines that "burden" not just in terms of patients and victims of the disease, but also in terms of **economic impact**. Malaria can account for up to 40 percent of total government spending on public health in the hardest-hit countries. It also stunts economic growth by discouraging foreign investment and tourism, impairs internal trade, and depletes human resources.

The encouraging news is that after early struggles, recent strides have brought RBM nearer to its goal. Experiences in countries from **Brazil to Vietnam** show that while malaria cannot be eradicated 100 percent, it can be reduced to a minimal problem.

For more information on the disease and RBM's efforts, visit its Web site at rbm.who.int. —Britta Waller

only skin she had left was under her wet nappy. Yet in all other respects she was this cheeky, normal little girl. My reaction was immediate: 'I'll round up a couple of friends and organize a swim to raise money for her trust fund.'

Mather mentioned the swim to his brother-in-law in Sydney, Australia, who enthusiastically agreed to hold a similar event there. "Then," Mather says, "I had this crazy idea — why not ring the world with swimmers?" He typed "swimming New York" into the Google search engine, tracked his way to a coordinator there and found enthusiastic backing; he repeated the trick for Tokyo, Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, Beijing and Paris.

Seven weeks later, his three-man swim had snowballed into Swim for Terri, 150 swims in 70 countries involving 10,000 people. "We had swims in Nepal, Greenland and Bolivia," says Mather. "None of these people had seen the documentary; they just got caught up in the wave. I discovered the online global village."

Swim for Terri eventually raised just short of £200,000. "Every penny went to her trust fund," says Mather. "When it was all over, someone called to say, 'Look, you've got something going here. What are we doing next year?' I was all ready to get back to my life" — Mather has four young children, and he worked for a financial publishing company for five years before putting his career on hold for WSM — "but I thought, 'OK, we seem to have harnessed some kind of spirit here, so maybe we can take it further.'"

Mather's decision to make malaria the focus of the next campaign was based on some of the principles embodied in Swim for Terri: simplicity, transparency and enthusiasm. "I was no expert on the disease," he stresses. "I've always been aware of malaria; I've traveled in areas where it's prevalent, and I've seen first-hand the way it can slaughter the most vulnerable, particularly children, on a grand scale. I was also aware of how easily that could be prevented."

His decision was also based on a father's love. "I've got four young children of my own, and the idea of them dying for the want of a \$5 bed net just seemed unthinkable," he says. "It was as visceral a re-

action as I had to the documentary about Terri."

Mather is eager to overcome people's ingrained skepticism about their charitable donations ever reaching the people they're supposed to. "The Swim for Terri Web site showed you exactly where the money went, and the WSM site [www.worldswimformalaria.com] will do the same," he says. "You'll see how many nets we've bought and where they're go-

ing and who they're helping; it won't go into some pot so that some NGO can do a feasibility study or something."

Mather has enlisted the aid of eight leading malaria experts — what he's calling the Malaria Advisory Group — who are do-

GET IN THE SWIM

Visit www.worldswimformalaria.com for more information about participating in this grass-roots fund-raising event in December.

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nating their expertise to guide the purchase and distribution of the nets. "We only have one employee, who's helping with the Web site and is paid by private donors," he explains. "We've got accounting and legal support from people like Microsoft and Citibank, so we have no overhead. This is a grassroots thing."

Mather has gone beyond the usual suspects in his quest for a million-man swim. He went to a British army major and asked for 5,000 volunteers: "He said, 'Never mind that—I'll just tell them to do it.'" He walked into the BBC and walked out with 100 pledges to organize swimming groups.

Why did the BBC get involved? "Simple," says Michael Hastings, the broadcast organization's head of corporate and social responsibility. "WSM is a terrific initiative to fight the world's largest single killer of children. Our participation echoes the spirit behind WSM: We're not a swimming organization, but many of us



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and our friends and families can swim."

Mather cajoled companies like Accenture and PricewaterhouseCoopers into getting 5,000 staff, family and friends into their trunks and bikinis. Groups of elite swimmers have come on board, along with swimwear giant Speedo. "Not only is [WSM] a remarkable concept, it's also a fantastic life-changing cause," says Stephen Rubin, chairman of Pentland Group plc, parent company of Speedo. "The whole world swimming community can come together, have fun and get involved in fighting one of the world's big killers."

Mather himself, "a very average swimmer indeed," will of course be taking to

the water on December 3. He intends to swim in the Serpentine, a lake in Hyde Park in London, at 6 p.m. on December 3: "It's going to be very cold." What happens on December 4? "I'll wake up with sore shoulders," he says, grinning. "Hopefully we'll start getting the first bed

nets distributed."

And will he have even more ambitious plans for the following year? Ten million swimmers against poverty?

"Listen, I'm just focusing on this year," he says. "But to me, the bigger lesson to take away from these experiences is that, where there's a will, there's a way in which individuals, who so often feel powerless in solving the world's big ills, can really do something to fundamentally change the lives of those less fortunate." ■

Stuart Husband is a freelance writer based in London. He pledged to participate in the fund-raiser; now all he has to do is learn to swim.