

## LETTER TO NEJM ABOUT SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

### Applying a social determinants approach to scabies prevention

In April 2016, a letter written after a series of meetings in Broome by the KAHPF Chair and two members of the Environmental Health SubCommittee to the international medical journal, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, was published. This short letter explained why a 'social determinants' approach is required to address the high rates of scabies that can be found in remote Aboriginal communities.

This letter based on the expertise in KAHPF explained why relying on limited strategies will not work. Instead, it recommended:

- ◇ Community empowerment
- ◇ Attention to environmental determinants
- ◇ Guaranteed access to comprehensive primary health care

In response, the authors of the original paper that had reported the results of a trial of mass drug administration (MDA) in Fiji agreed with KAHPF's recommendations.

KAHPF's letter emphasized that eradication of scabies has already been achieved in non-Aboriginal communities. In affluent societies and urban settings where the social determinants have been addressed, MDA was never required. A 'social determinants' approach is best practice.

KAHPF's letter and the authors' response are attached.

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## Mass Drug Administration for Scabies Control

of ivermectin for scabies control.” We counsel greater circumspection from our combined perspectives in remote Australia working with aboriginal communities that seek to be rid of scabies. Scabies control is a long-term proposition requiring community empowerment, attention to environmental determinants, and guaranteed access to comprehensive primary health care. Eradication of endemic scabies as already achieved in affluent societies did not require mass drug administration. It may not have been the intention of the authors to imply on the basis of their outcomes at 12 months that mass drug administration is an ethical alternative to raising living conditions and ensuring safe water, sanitation, and better education for all. In the region of Western Australia known as the Kimberley, 95% of scabies cases are attributable to the environment.<sup>1</sup> The postcolonial conditions in which populations with endemic scabies are forced to live in order to reside on land that for centuries belonged to their forebears will not be addressed by mass drug administration alone. Recommending more trials of mass drug administration misdirects attention and resources away from the known “causes of the causes.”<sup>2,3</sup>

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No potential conflict of interest relevant to this letter was reported.

1. McMullen C, Eastwood A, Ward J. Environmental attributable fractions in remote Australia: the potential of a new approach for local public health action. *Aust N Z J Public Health* 2015 August 10 (Epub ahead of print).

2. Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health: final report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2008.

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**TO THE EDITOR:** Romani and colleagues conclude that their data “support the mass administration

3. McDonald EL, Bailie R, Michel T. Development and trialing of a tool to support a systems approach to improve social determinants of health in rural and remote Australian communities: the Healthy Community Assessment Tool. *Int J Equity Health* 2013;12:15.

DOI: 10.1056/NEJMc1600495

**THE AUTHORS REPLY:** In response to Mahé: the aspect of our results that was unexpected was not the substantial decline in scabies prevalence after mass drug administration, but the further decline (in all three trial groups) between the 3-month and 12-month observation points. To explain this finding, we speculated that the 3-month observation may have been an overestimate of prevalence owing to the persistence of scabetic nodules after successful treatment.

We wholeheartedly agree with O'Donnell and colleagues about the importance of improving environmental and living conditions in scabies control, regardless of whether mass drug administration is being considered.

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Since publication of their article, the authors report no further potential conflict of interest.

DOI: 10.1056/NEJMc1600495