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International Trachoma Initiative and The Task Force for Child Survival and Development Announce New Merger to Eliminate Blinding Trachoma and Fight Against Other Neglected Tropical Diseases

New Global Partnership to Target World's Leading Cause of Preventable Blindness—Trachoma—through Global Advocacy, Fundraising and Support of Trachoma Control Programs

(New York, NY) – The International Trachoma Initiative (ITI) and the Task Force for Child Survival and Development (the Task Force) announced today that they will join forces to leverage additional resources and significantly scale up efforts to eliminate blinding trachoma. Trachoma, a Neglected Tropical Disease (NTD) that is the world's leading cause of preventable blindness, affects 41 million people, mostly women and children, in 56 countries. While trachoma can be prevented and cured with inexpensive, time-limited treatment, an estimated 6.8 million people have already lost some or all of their sight to this infectious disease, and an additional 8.2 million people with trichiasis are at immediate risk of irreversible blindness.

“All of us at ITI are excited by the enormous potential that this merger brings to eliminating blinding trachoma,” said Ibrahim Jabr, President of ITI. “We realized in 2006 that to increase the impact of global trachoma control efforts, ITI would need a complementary partner to help in a scaled up effort to meet the World Health Organization goal of elimination by 2020. After a year-long search, we are confident that the Task Force is that partner. ”

ITI was created through a public-private partnership of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and Pfizer Inc in 1998. “Pfizer is confident that the merger between ITI and the Task Force is a positive step forward in ridding the world of blinding trachoma. Pfizer is pleased with the progress we have made with our partners over the last ten years—providing over a billion dollars of pharmaceutical and financial donations—that has helped break the cycle of poverty trachoma imposes on millions of families and communities world-wide. We look forward to continuing our support and working through ITI and its Trachoma Expert Committee to provide the Zithromax that will be needed to eliminate blinding trachoma by 2020 and restore the health and well-being of families now and generations to come,” said Jeffrey B. Kindler, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Pfizer Inc.

“The mission and goals of ITI are a strong complement to the Task Force mission,” stated Mark Rosenberg, M.D., Executive Director of The Task Force for Child Survival and Development. “We are at an important juncture for trachoma control efforts and this commitment from Pfizer to supply Zithromax will help mobilize the partners essential to the success of this mission.”

“This merger with the Task Force will not only improve efficiency and impact, but will also allow us to take full advantage of opportunities to integrate the SAFE strategy approach to trachoma

control with other NTDs,” stated Jabr. “The Task Force has a proven record in the treatment and prevention of three NTDs: onchocerciasis, lymphatic filariasis, and intestinal worms.”

“After an extensive review of proposals from organizations that wished to partner with us on this historic challenge, ITI’s board selected the Task Force because of their outstanding capacity in program development and implementation, fundraising and advocacy,” stated Robert Mallet, ITI Board Chairman. “We are also very excited that CARE USA has committed to being an important partner on the SAFE strategy, the cornerstone of ITI’s work.”

The World Health Assembly (WHA)-endorsed SAFE strategy combines public health education, improved hygiene, sight-saving surgery and treatment with antibiotics donated to ITI. SAFE stands for Surgery, Antibiotics, Facial cleanliness, and Environmental improvements. The Task Force, working with CARE USA, provides a forum for sharing knowledge and expertise in these four program areas, especially in the area of integration of mass drug administration with the global goals of sanitation and safe water.

The new ITI/Task Force merger will work to:

- Scale up efforts to address trachoma beyond the 18 countries where ITI support is being provided to the additional 38 countries where trachoma is endemic.
- Leverage resources and expertise, creating new partnerships to fight trachoma and other NTDs.
- Build on ITI’s success in promoting the SAFE strategy, ensuring that implementation of the different elements of the strategy are coordinated, complementary and supportive.

Since 1998, ITI has been the only global organization dedicated exclusively to the elimination of blinding trachoma. Created through a public-private partnership of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and Pfizer Inc, ITI works with governments, the private sector, international organizations, and NGOs to fight trachoma and the other NTDs that restrict human development, especially in Africa. Building on the successful elimination of blinding trachoma in Morocco in 2006, ITI currently works in 18 countries in Africa and Asia.

“We are proud of the long-standing partnership with Pfizer Inc. and a shared mission of fighting blindness. Working together, we will eliminate new cases of trachoma by the year 2020, a great step in ending preventable blindness worldwide,” said Albert Brandel, President, Lions Clubs International. “Lions play a key role in the control program locally by distributing Zithromax, educating communities on the disease and conducting screening and surgery programs.”

The Atlanta-based Task Force was formed in 1984 as a collaboration between WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, the World Bank and the Rockefeller Foundation to achieve the goal of universal child immunization. Over the last twenty-five years, the Task Force has emphasized collaboration with a diverse group of partners to achieve common strategic goals in child health and development, including infectious diseases such as polio, malaria, river blindness, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS.

The Task Force has a proven record in treating and preventing disease. Last year alone, the Task Force coordinated the distribution of 150 million doses of medicine to treat diseases such as river blindness, elephantiasis, and intestinal worms in children. The Task Force currently houses programs that address three NTDs whose prevention and treatment could be linked to control of blinding trachoma:

- The Mectizan Donation Program provides medical, technical and administrative oversight of the donation of Mectizan by Merck & Co., Inc. for the treatment of onchocerciasis, and the donation of albendazole by GlaxoSmithKline to be co-administered with Mectizan for the elimination of lymphatic filariasis in areas co-endemic for onchocerciasis.
- The Lymphatic Filariasis Support Center provides the technical assistance and problem-solving research necessary to ensure a strong scientific base for the massive global public health effort currently underway to eliminate LF.
- “Children Without Worms,” a new partnership between the Task Force and Johnson & Johnson, increases access to quality mebendazole to realize the vision of all the world's children free of intestinal worms.

“Over the ten years of ITI’s existence, we all have made significant progress in trachoma control. Our new merger with the Task Force is the beginning of a new chapter—one that will increase momentum and effectiveness and will take all of us much closer to our common goal—the elimination of blinding trachoma, the leading infectious cause of preventable blindness worldwide,” concluded Jabr.

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*The International Trachoma Initiative (ITI) is a non-governmental organization working to prevent, treat and ultimately eliminate blinding trachoma. Building on success in Morocco, ITI currently works in 18 countries in Africa and Asia. ITI is a major proponent and facilitator of the SAFE strategy to prevent and eliminate trachoma through **S**urgery, **A**ntibiotics, **F**acial cleanliness and **E**nvironmental improvement. ITI, created through a public-private partnership of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and Pfizer Inc, collaborates with international agencies, governmental, and non-governmental organizations to build targeted support—including Zithromax® donated by Pfizer—for expanded implementation of the SAFE strategy, operational research and program evaluation, education and advocacy. <http://www.trachoma.org>*

The Task Force for Child Survival and Development (The Task Force) is a nonprofit, public health organization with a 25 year history of using collaboration to save and improve the lives of millions of people around the world each year. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, the Task Force is recognized for its expertise and experience in cultivating partnerships with organizations, experts, and communities focused on both international and domestic health and human development. We partner with leading experts in various fields who come together to improve the way we use health information and solve problems in a collaborative way. Task Force programs encompass the areas of disease eradication and control, public health informatics, global health collaboration, and child well-being. <http://www.taskforce.org>.