

Zero malaria infections in Sri Lanka

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The World Health Organization (WHO) named Sri Lanka as a malaria-free country in 2016. However, not a single case of malaria has been reported in Sri Lanka since 2012.

The country was able to make the number of malaria infections zero by that time as a result of the malaria control programs that have been in place for nearly 100 years. Sri Lanka as well as a large number of other countries has now eradicated malaria.

Thousands

Although Sri Lanka has been able to eradicate the malaria epidemic in recent times, on a number of occasions Sri Lanka had to deal with severe malaria epidemics.

Thousands of patients died and their families were left largely helpless, especially as the health sector in the country was not so advanced decades ago.

This article is about such a dangerous malaria epidemic situation in Sri Lanka, which occurred in the 1930s.

Malaria is caused by single-celled microorganisms of the Plasmodium group. It is spread exclu-



sively through bites of infected Anopheles mosquito. It causes symptoms that typically include fever, tiredness, vomiting, and headaches. In severe cases, it can cause yellow skin, seizures, coma, or death.

Symptoms usually begin 10 to 15 days after being bitten by an infected mosquito. If not properly treated, people may have recurrences of the disease months later. In those who have recently survived an infection, reinfection usually causes milder symptoms

The mosquito bite introduces the parasites from the mosquito's saliva into a person's blood. Most deaths due to malaria are caused by *P. falciparum*, whereas *P. vivax*, *P. ovale*, and *P. malariae* generally cause a milder form of malaria.

Deaths

The species *P. knowlesi* rarely causes disease in humans. Malaria is typically diagnosed by the microscopic examination of blood using blood films, or with antigen-based

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PERERA SAID THAT HE HAD SEEN A LARGE NUMBER OF PATIENTS WHO DIED BEFORE HIM, DUE TO THE LACK OF PROPER TREATMENT, AND THAT SOME VILLAGES HAD BECOME GRAVEYARDS. HE HAD ALSO SEEN BABIES TRYING TO SUCKLE FROM THEIR MOTHERS' BREASTS WITHOUT KNOWING THAT THEIR MOTHER HAD DIED

ated that a quarter of the country's population was infected with malaria at that time.

The Government was working hard to provide health care, food, clothing and economic rehabilitation for the people at that time. The then Minister of Home Affairs, Sir D. B. Jayatilaka was given this role and he too was once infected with malaria.

Vulnerable

Members of the Sri Lanka Sooriyamal Movement, led by the late Dr. N.M. Perera had at the time, gone to many areas in the country to find the vulnerable villagers affected by malaria.

Perera said that he had seen a large number of patients who died before him, due to the lack of proper treatment, and that some villages had become graveyards. He had also seen babies trying to suckle from their mothers' breasts without knowing that their mother had died. As he went from village to village carrying things like rice, dhal, marmite, sugar and tea leaves for the malaria patients, Perera was nicknamed *Parippu Mama* by the villagers.

