

BBC Africa 'La Vie'

Trachoma features: English translation

When eyelashes protecting the eyes become a source of continuous discomfort, this leads to profound problems. It is often called trachoma. This eye condition is the leading cause of blindness worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it affects more than 1.9 million people around the world. Today in 'La Vie', our BBC health and wellbeing programme, we will see how a doctor from Benin is working tirelessly so that his fellow citizens are no longer part of these statistics.

Part 1

Chlamydia trachomatis, as hard to pronounce as it is harmful, is the bacteria that causes trachoma, chronic conjunctivitis, the leading cause of infectious blindness worldwide. In Benin, our reporter Khadidiatou Cissé went to meet the doctor who has been investing so much time over the years to fight against the disease. For two of his patients, it's the beginning of the end of a long nightmare.

He has roamed the country, by car or on foot, always carrying his binocular magnifiers. Dr Amadou Alfabio has been on a mission for a number of years to accelerate trachoma elimination in Benin. Today, I have followed him to the village of Biro, in Nikki.

"I have seen that some of her eyelashes are touching her eyes and her eyelashes have been plucked in places."

According to WHO, trachoma is the oldest known eye disease, affecting more than 1.9 million people worldwide, 61% of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa. When left untreated, trachoma causes the eyelid to turn inwards, causing an extremely painful rubbing of the eyelashes on the eyeball, resulting in potential blindness.

Bona Woure has been living with trachoma for more than 10 years. Throughout her painful experience, she has been able to rely on her daughter-in-law Mannou for help.

"Day to day, when my eyelashes don't touch my eyes, it's not a problem. But I only need to feel one touching, and it gets complicated. My eyes start to water. That's when I call my daughter-in-law so that she can pluck my eyelashes. Afterwards, everything is back to normal."

"When her eyelashes rub against her eyes, she calls me and I come running. I use a bit of powder to catch the eyelash and I pluck it. That's how I do it. As soon as it starts to itch and her eyes start to water, it affects me. In those moments, it's as though I also felt the pain. And as soon as she is better, I also feel better."

Trachoma is transmitted through direct contact with nasal or eye secretions on the fingers of an infected person, with objects carrying infectious agents such as bedsheets or clothes, or with flies.

A few minutes away from Bona Woure's house, I meet Orou, a 70-year-old woman who has been living with trachoma for over 40 years.

"When my eyelashes touch my cornea, pain increases with each movement. It makes it difficult for me to see and my eyes start to water abundantly. The most difficult part is when my eyelashes rub against my eyes. It always starts with headaches and a stinging sensation. That's when I reach for a razorblade to cut my eyelashes. Then I use a few eye-drops to ease the pain. Then I feel better."

Tomorrow, Bona and Orou will both undergo free corrective surgery to stop their eyelashes from rubbing against the eyeball. For Bona, it will be a relief for herself, as well as for her daughter in-law. For Orou, it will be an unthinkable ending to a routine she thought she would never be able to break free from.

Part 2

Earlier we met with Bona and Orou, two people living with trachoma, a painful eye condition. How does trachoma manifest itself? What are the symptoms? How does it get better? Follow this Q&A session between Alfabeto and our reporter.

Today, at the Biro health centre, Bona and Orou have joined 10 other trachoma patients. They have all come to undergo surgery performed by Dr Amadou Alfabeto.

"We separate the internal part of the eyelid into two parts. One part has to go underneath the section where the eyelashes are. This is where the bottom part needs to go. If you time it, each operation takes around 15 to 20 minutes. Each intervention protects the patient from blindness.

"Once people have undergone surgery, they are free and three days later they can resume normal activities."

Her house being quite far from the health centre, Bona will stay the night. As for Orou, her youngest son wanted to come to collect his mother.

Part 3

We are going back to Benin to see Bona and Orou. They say they have been waiting for so long has arrived. They will be able to open their eyes after their operation. Is it the end of their ordeal? Find out with Khadidiatou Cissé.

24 hours later, patients are already back at the Biro Health Centre. One of the most anticipated phases in this process takes place today.

"I'm very happy and thankful. My daughter in-law used to come and pluck my eyelashes. But now it's finished. We are free. Thanks to the operation, I can now open my eyes fully."

According to WHO, trachoma can be eliminated with the SAFE strategy: surgery to correct the eyelashes; antibiotics for infectious trachoma; facial cleanliness to reduce transmission; and environmental improvements such as control of disease-spreading flies and access to clean water. At the end of this final step, the feeling of relief and

wellbeing seems widespread. For Orou, her overflowing joy has led to the expression of a hidden talent.