

University investigating ways of improving health in Africa

✖ University of Edinburgh research could improve the health of millions living in Sub-Saharan Africa, where fears have been expressed about the long-term effects of drug programmes.

Snail fever or bilharzia kills around 280,000 a year and research into the effectiveness of health programmes set up to combat it have been investigated fully.

More people have been treated for bilharzia with a drug called praziquantel in mass drug administration (MDA) programmes, which treat people whether they are infected or not. Now researchers say that little is known about the effectiveness of the programmes in the long term.

Scientists now want the use of the drug to be closely monitored over the next decades, as the University of Edinburgh team say it could have major implications for the spread of the disease. It is not known how long the effect of the drugs programme lasts, and parasites could develop resistance to the drug.

The study is published in the journal *Lancet Infectious Diseases*. The work was carried out in collaboration with the Schistosomiasis Control Initiative at Imperial College London.

Dr Francisca Mutapi, of the University of Edinburgh's School of Biological Sciences, who led the study, said: "For the first time, we are approaching a point where most people affected by bilharzia will receive treatment at least once during their lifetime. MDA programmes are a welcome development but, in planning for the future, we need to know more about their complex effects on the affected populations – both human and parasite."

