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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## What a Little Vitamin A Could Do

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

KOUNDARA, Guinea

I'm bouncing across West Africa in the back of a Land Cruiser with the winner of my "win-a-trip" contest, Paul Bowers, a student at the University of South Carolina, talking about wonky ways to tackle global poverty — such as vitamin A capsules.

Americans pretty much take vitamin A for granted, but many of the world's poorest people lack it. And as a result, it is estimated that more than half-a-million children die or go blind each year. There's a simple fix: vitamin A capsules that cost about 2 cents each.

I had planned this "win-a-trip" journey in part to introduce Paul to the problem of blindness as an element of global poverty. When I first visited West Africa myself as a backpacking law student, I was staggered and depressed by the blind beggars who circled me with outstretched palms.

So there we were, Paul and I, "enjoying" a 50-cent-per-person "breakfast" at a "restaurant" here in the town of Koundara in northern Guinea when we first came face to face with blindness on this trip.

A man named Amadou Bailo shuffled toward us, holding one end of a stick as his daughter held the other and walked ahead of him. In wealthy countries, the blind have seeing-eye dogs; in poor countries, the blind have seeing-eye children. The girl, Mariama, who thought she might be about 9 years old, has never been able to attend school because she spends her days guiding her father. Her older brother was the father's guide before that, so he never went to school either.

"His blindness has kept two of his children from going to school," noted Shawn Baker of Helen Keller International, an [aid group](#) that works on vision and nutrition issues. Mr. Baker met us, after we had crossed over from neighboring Guinea-Bissau, at such a sleepy border post that we had to wake up a border guard.

Mr. Bailo had lost his sight from an excruciating affliction called river blindness, which is caused by baby worms that infest the body and destroy the optic nerve. River blindness was once endemic in much of West Africa and seemed almost hopeless. Yet today in one of the

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once endemic in much of West Africa and seemed almost hopeless. Yet today, in one of the great triumphs of humanitarian workers, it is under control and perhaps close to being conquered.

Credit goes to former President Jimmy Carter for helping to lead the fight against the disease, to a number of aid groups and to Merck, which donated the medicines to kill the baby worms. Mr. Bailo will never recover his vision, but these days, virtually no one in West Africa is going blind from the disease.

Americans sometimes don't want to help poor countries because of doubts about whether aid works. There are legitimate doubts about the effectiveness of many aid efforts, but there also are extraordinary triumphs that don't get attention — such as the war on blindness.

Which leads us back to vitamin A.

In the major Sierra Leone city of Bo, which is about a three-day drive from Koundara, we visited the Paul School for the Blind, an audacious private institution that struggles to educate blind children in one of the world's poorest countries. Some of its students were congenitally blind — and one girl had plastic melted into her eyes by rebel soldiers — but 80 percent of the students had lost their sight for reasons related to vitamin A deficiency.

According to the United Nations, half of the children in many African countries are deficient in vitamin A (which comes from liver, mangos, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes and dark, green leafy vegetables), and a disease like measles will quickly deplete their supply further and trigger blindness. The upshot is that vitamin A deficiency is the leading cause of child blindness in the world today.

Health wonks have found that vitamin A supplements reduce not only blindness, but also death from diarrhea and other diseases. [A review](#) by Unicef and Helen Keller International reports that in areas such as West Africa where many children lack the vitamin, child mortality drops by approximately 23 percent after vitamin A capsules are distributed to children.

“Addressing vitamin A deficiency may be the most cost-effective intervention you can implement,” said Mr. Baker of Helen Keller International.

Now there's a big push already under way to distribute vitamin A capsules twice a year to all children at risk, by such organizations as Unicef, Helen Keller International and the Micronutrient Initiative of Canada. By one estimate, this could lead to 600,000 children's lives saved each year in Africa — and, in the future, many fewer blind beggars being led by their children or grandchildren.

By now, Paul has bumped over so many potholed dirt roads with me that he probably wishes he had come in second in my contest. But it's a special pleasure when our journey shows us not only the immense challenges that Africa faces, but also the immense progress that is

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5/14/2009

Op-Ed Columnist - What a Little Vita...

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