

Conversation between Against Malaria Foundation (Rob Mather) and GiveWell (Natalie Stone) on February 11, 2011

AMF: I spoke with Elie Hassenfeld and Holden Karnofsky in September last year (2010) and described the Post-Distribution Surveys (PDSs) we were now including as a mandatory element of all distributions for which we fund nets. These surveys, conducted 6, 18, 30 and 42 months post-distribution, allow an assessment of net usage levels and net condition.

The first batch of 13 PDS has been added to the website alongside each distribution (and accessible via <http://www.againstmalaria.com/PDSs>). Further PDSs will be added as soon as they are received.

We had hoped to have the first block of results and data added to the website by the end of December 2010. I wanted to let you know about our progress and why the initial survey results were delayed.

First, PDSs have been slower to be returned than expected.

Second, fewer PDSs have been returned in the initial batch than expected. This has been because a distribution partner was either unable to carry out a survey (typically because they no longer operated in the original distribution region or had insufficient staff and resources to carry out a survey) or refused to carry one out (typically lack of resources has been offered as an explanation but we class some responses as a refusal where we do not believe a lack of resources is a legitimate reason).

Third, we decided to begin a process of formally rating Distribution Partners on the basis of our experience of working with them and to make those ratings available to the public. Conducting PDSs is an important element of that rating process and we needed more time than expected to liaise with distribution partners about PDS content.

Fourth, once partners started to carry out PDSs, we received feedback and suggestions about the content, order and phrasing of questions in the PDS. We restructured the survey to improve it and this had a modest delay on its wider roll-out.

The PDS still remains brief, consisting of six questions on one piece of paper. This minimizes the time taken to conduct a survey in a household whilst still providing actionable information, eg. renewed malaria education, messaging re care of nets.

Regarding Distribution Partner Ratings, there are three reasons why we have begun this now.

First, AMF has now been operating for five years and we have built up a reasonable

body of experience of what can reasonably be expected of a distribution partner. We also have significant experience of how some 50 distribution partners have carried out between them some 130 distributions.

Distribution partners are often working in challenging environments with more limited resources than they would like. An assessment of their performance has to take that into account and be fair.

At the same time, nets only protect people if they are both distributed well (which includes, amongst other things, a strong community involvement in the distribution process and effective and ongoing malaria education) and the nets continue to be used. Continued use, for the three to four to five year lifetime of the net (the period through which the insecticide remains effective) is only possible if the nets are used with a degree of care so they do not tear and physically degrade.

Second, it is sensible for us to consider the performance of a distribution partner in our assessment of for whom we fund nets. We have many times more requests for nets than we can fulfill (we could fund an additional \$10 million in proposals right away if we had the money) and whilst criteria for assessing a distribution proposal will always include the area being badly affected by malaria, our confidence in how a distribution partner will manage pre, during and post-distribution activities is relevant. We want to make sure we are only working with the best organizations.

Third, we believe that rating distribution partners, as long as it is fair, clear and transparent, and open to challenge by the distribution partner if they disagree with our assessment, can contribute to improved distribution performance, both for them and us.

We are rating distribution partners on how easy they are to work with, do they do what they say they will, do they provide distribution reports, photos, and videos in a timely manner, and do they conduct post-distribution surveys. We grade performance in each area as either excellent, strong, acceptable, limited or weak. Overall ratings of a distribution partner will be on a one to five star scale. We will favor working with the 4 and 5 star organizations for future grants.

GiveWell: What are the technical details of the Post-Distribution Survey? Who conducts them?

AMF: By technical details, do you mean the questions we will ask? We ask, in each of 50 households constituting a survey sample, and for each net in the household, who slept under it, the condition of the net, is it used correctly, is it an AMF net. I will email you a copy of the survey form.

The surveys are conducted either by a senior individual in the community, such as a village leader or health leader, or by someone from outside the immediate community who is respected such as a senior person at a local hospital or other

organization.

We make clear to the distribution partners we are not going to rate them on the state the nets are in. We do not want to provide an incentive for nets to be recorded as being in a better state than they are. We say to the distribution partners or those conducting the survey, finding some or many of the nets are not in that good a state will indicate an integrity and honesty in carrying out the survey. We also remind it is pointless to inflate results as it may lead to no additional nets being provided where in fact they are needed.

GiveWell: How is the randomization done?

AMF: We give guidelines to our partners to help ensure the sample is random. We do not mean, by the way, random in a statistically significant or scientific way, as the sample size for the surveys is itself not large enough and the rigour of our methodology is not such as to allow scientific, statistically significant results. We suggest sensible methods such as visiting different parts of the distribution area, some households from each of a number of villages, and not households in a row, and where possible to use the beneficiary list to randomly select who will be interviewed before going out to do the surveys.

GiveWell: Have results been what you expected? Were there any surprises?

AMF: We have been surprised by some. For example, results were better than we expected in areas we thought would face more challenges, such as IDP camps where people live in temporary structures. It may be that even when living in temporary and small structures, many people are organised and take pride in their living space. We've seen worse results than expected where there are a large number of people sharing a living space.

There does seem to be a strong correlation between partners who are providing effective malaria education and have an ongoing connection with communities, and nets being in better condition. We rarely if ever now work with groups that do not have a permanent or semi-permanent connection with communities.

Before commenting with greater confidence on correlations, trends or factors that influence net usage over time, we'd like to see 100 surveys or more. So far, we have received about 30 surveys. The surveys are public, or about to be public, on our website. Those not yet public are having the data moved into a new survey summary format.