



World-transforming partnerships

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It takes a certain amount of audacity to defend public-private partnerships.

At their worst, they can be dysfunctional (think of the stillborn redevelopment of Union Station); hard to control (think of Highway 407) and secretive (think of the \$550 million contract for the new William Osler Hospital in Brampton).

But at their best, they can accomplish things that neither governments nor corporations can do.

Ross Wallace, director of strategic partnerships at the MarS Centre, which brings together scientists, entrepreneurs and investors, has seen a lot of P3s at their best.

Nowhere have they shone brighter than in the treatment of neglected diseases such as malaria, chagas, visceral leishmaniasis and dengue fever. These illnesses, which claim more than 3 million lives a year, are of little interest to the pharmaceutical giants because the people suffering from them are too poor to pay for the development of new drugs.

They confound governments because policy-makers lack the tools to convert scientific breakthroughs into affordable medicine.

For years, no one could find a way out of this conundrum.

Wallace was as baffled as everybody else. But he believed a business model could be created that would connect medical discoveries coming out of universities and government labs with the money available from private foundations.

A year ago, he won one of six fellowships offered by the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation to young people eager to tackle global problems. His research led in an unexpected – and welcome – direction. It turned out that he didn't have to invent a new business model. One already existed.

"I found some really exciting collaboration going on," he said. "A new breed of partnerships had emerged that completely transformed the development and delivery of pharmaceuticals for neglected diseases."

So Wallace redefined his task. He would look for ways to bolster these fledgling P3s.

They have a very short history. The first grew out of a program launched by the World Bank in 1999 to pull together money and talent for research on tropical diseases. But it remained buried within the global bureaucracy.

Over the next eight years, others sprang up.

One of the most successful, the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative, was the brainchild of Dr. James Orbinski of Toronto.

As president of Médecins San Frontières, Orbinski had tried to convince world leaders to underwrite the development of drugs for diseases the pharmaceutical companies considered unprofitable. They responded with platitudes.

Refusing to admit defeat, Orbinski and his colleagues launched their own non-profit drug development network, linking dedicated medical researchers with pharmaceutical producers in developing countries.

This spring, it unveiled an effective new malaria treatment at a cost of \$1 a day for adults, 50 cents for children.

A second public-private partnership that is making a difference is the Institute for OneWorld Health, based in San Francisco.

It buys the rights to develop drugs for neglected diseases from the multinationals, then does the lab work and clinical trials using its own team of scientists (many of whom have fled Big Pharma). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has given it more than \$100 million.

OneWorld has just released a serum that cures visceral leishmaniasis, a deadly disease transmitted by sandflies.

These innovative P3s have produced a "paradigm shift" in the behaviour of pharmaceutical executives, Wallace says. Companies such as GlaxoSmithKline, AstraZeneca, Sanofi-Aventis and Novartis have instituted a no-profit, no-loss formula for work on neglected diseases.

The laggards are governments, including Canada's. Not only do they offer little financial backing to these pioneering P3s, they don't seem to want to get involved. "I kept looking for CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency) but I didn't see as much as I was hoping to," Wallace says.

His fellowship is now over, but Wallace remains a man on a mission.

He'll tell anyone who will listen that public-private partnerships can change the world. They've already begun.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.