



MECTIZAN AND DR. MOHAMMED A. AZIZ

*Dr. Mohammed Aziz (right),
then Senior Director for
Clinical Research, MSDRL,
examines a 14-year-old boy
in West Africa who has been
blinded by onchocerciasis.*

Dr. Mohammed A. Aziz was not a salesman and the product he relentlessly developed will never make any money for Merck. But the late Dr. Aziz is one of the heroes of the company.

This native of Bangladesh attended Presidency College in Calcutta, India, and then Dacca Medical College, receiving the equivalent of a U.S. medical degree in 1954. He continued his studies at the University of Minnesota (Ph.D. in clinical pathology, 1962), at the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health (1962), and at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (1970, Diploma in Clinical Medicine of the Tropics).

Academic life beckoned, as did public service. He taught and conducted research at the University of Maryland (1962-73) and served for a time as coordinator for the World Health Organization in Sierra Leone, West Africa (1975-76).

Following his service in Africa, Aziz decided to accept a position at Merck—a decision that would prove to be much to the advantage of mankind. Aziz joined the company in 1976 as a director in domestic clinical research and by 1981 was a senior director of the firm's international clinical research. It was in this capacity that he played his leading role in the development of *Mectizan*, a drug that treats and prevents the dread river blindness disease (onchocerciasis).

Aziz was the first to establish that an appropriate formulation of MSD's antiparasitic ivermectin was effective against the disease. As Roy Vagelos explained, "It was Dr. Aziz's drive and organizational ability that set in motion a worldwide series of multi-clinic studies comparing *Mectizan* with the standard therapy then available."

In this extended effort, Aziz found what he had sought at Merck: "opportunity to do what I most want to do—research to help mankind." He was the champion of a drug that was not in demand in the wealthy nations of the world. This drug was not a subject of the "crisis" or "war" mentality that periodically sweeps through the American population and medical communities. But Aziz persisted, and in 1987 his seven-year clinical program ended with success. Suffering from cancer, Aziz was honored with Merck's coveted Scientific Award of the Board of Directors. He died that year at the age of 58 shortly before the first free mass-treatment program for *Mectizan* was set in motion. The program was a fitting memorial to Aziz's long battle against one of the world's most devastating tropical diseases.