

Celebrating World Polio Day on October 24th

Story by Ed Kolybaba

Oct 14, 2021



Few diseases frightened families across the world more in the early part of the 20th century than polio did. Polio struck in the warm summer months, sweeping through communities as an epidemic every few years. Though most people recovered quickly, some suffered temporary or permanent paralysis and even death. Many polio survivors were disabled for life. They became a visible, painful reminder to society of the enormous toll this disease took on young lives.

During the first half of the 20th century, poliomyelitis, a.k.a. polio, hit Canada harder than anywhere else. Canada experienced its first localized polio outbreaks in the 1910s with the first major wave of larger outbreaks in the late 1920s. Like covid 19 to date, the country experienced four waves, with the fourth, from 1946 to 1953, being the most severe, reaching a national crisis in 1953.

Thankfully, the research by Dr. Jonas Salk led to a successfully tested vaccine against poliomyelitis in 1953 which was approved for use in 1955; and by Dr. Albert Sabin who identified the three types of Poliovirus and developed an attenuated oral vaccine in the 1960's that provided longer lasting immunity than the Salk vaccine.

Through the administration of the vaccines, the last case of wild-type paralytic polio was reported in North America in 1991 and the entire continent was certified polio free in 1994.

While Rotary International started working to eradicate polio in 1979 through immunization campaigns throughout Southeast Asia and Latin America, it was not until 1985 that Rotary introduced PolioPlus, the first effort to immunize every child in the world with polio vaccine. Three years later in 1988, Rotary pushed forward a global resolution to eradicate polio at the 1988 World Health Assembly in Geneva which resulted in Rotary spearheading the launch of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative with the World Health Organization, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and UNICEF.



Today, with the work of this partnership, and the generous donations from Rotarians around the world, including Rotarians from the Rotary Club of Kelowna Sunrise, the PolioPlus Program has impacted the world in such a profound way that has resulted in polio cases having fallen 99.9% since 1988.

We are so thankful, yes, you and I, for what a difference it is to have a polio-free family, community, country and world; and we must never reduce our efforts to make sure that this focus is sustained so that every global citizen enjoys the same polio-free life. We need to understand and recognize that persistent barriers to reaching every child with polio vaccines and the covid-19 pandemic have contributed to an increase in polio cases worldwide. Last year, 1226 cases of all forms of polio were recorded compared to 138 in 2018. This means that our efforts cannot lessen and that the PolioPlus Program still needs our financial support. While we are closer than ever in eradicating polio, we are not done yet. The Rotary Foundation still needs funds to continue immunizations and surveillance efforts. Our gifts will get us closer to the finish line.

As Rotary Club of Kelowna Sunrise Rotarians we join together with our friends, neighbours, community and the world in observing World Polio Day on October 24th.



While this is a day to celebrate the progress in working to eradicate polio from the world, more importantly, it is a time to reflect, raise awareness and recognize that we all have a part in 'serving to change' the world and to make it a better place for everyone.