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Polio

Poliomyelitis (polio) is a crippling and potentially fatal disease that still threatens children in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The poliovirus invades the nervous system, and can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours. It can strike at any age, but mainly affects children under five years of age.

PolioPlus

In 1985, Rotary International created PolioPlus – a program to immunize all the world's children against polio. To date, Rotary has contributed US\$616 million and countless volunteer hours to the protection of more than two billion children in 122 countries. These efforts are providing much needed polio vaccine, operational support, medical personnel, laboratory equipment and educational materials for health workers and parents. In addition, Rotary has played a major role in decisions by donor governments to contribute over US\$3 billion to the effort. That amount, combined with direct funds from Rotary, is more than half the money needed for the entire global polio eradication program.

Global Polio Eradication Initiative

With its community-based network worldwide, Rotary is the volunteer arm and top private sector contributor to a global partnership dedicated to eradicating polio. Since its launch in 1988, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative - spearheaded by the World Health Organization (WHO), Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UNICEF - has reduced the incidence of polio by more than 99 percent. At the time, more than 125 countries were polio-endemic, and

more than 350,000 children were paralysed by the disease each year.

Polio Today

Today, endemic wild poliovirus has been eliminated from all but four countries in the world (Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan), and 2,000 cases were reported worldwide in 2006. Though great progress has been made, challenges remain. Overall, the quality of immunization campaigns must be improved, and more funding is critically needed as the GPEI is facing a funding gap of US\$540 million for 2007-08. In response, high-level representatives from governments, donors and international agencies, recently endorsed a final plan with clear milestones over the next 24-months to tackle these and other challenges to a polio-free world.

Rotarians in Action

Besides raising funds, over one million men and women of Rotary have donated their time and personal resources to help immunize nearly 2 billion children during mass immunization campaigns throughout the world. Rotarians prepare and distribute different types of mass communication tools to get the message to people cut off from the mainstream by conflict, geography or poverty. Rotarians also recruit fellow volunteers, assist with transporting the vaccine, administer the vaccine to children and provide other logistical support.

Lasting Legacy

The savings of polio eradication are potentially as high as US\$ 1.5 billion per year - funds that could be used to address other public health priorities. The savings in human suffering will be immeasurable.