



Can Rotary End Polio?

Question: How do you end Polio worldwide?

Answer: By vaccinating one child at a time.

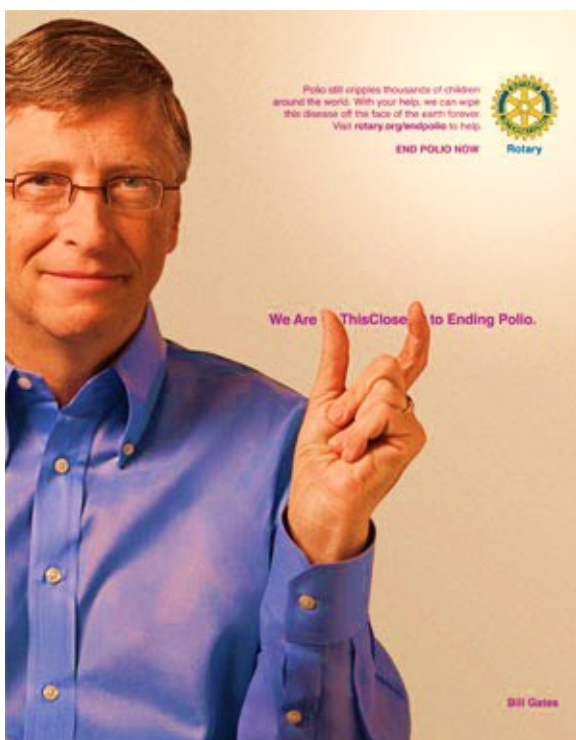
Why doesn't Justin Bieber have polio?

If you asked what former politician Kim Beazley, actors Mia Farrow and Alan Alda, musicians Joni Mitchell and Neil Young, golfer Jack Nicklaus, movie director Francis Ford Coppola and a woman in India who walks on all fours all have in common, few people would be able to identify the common link between them.

The answer is that each suffered from the effects of childhood polio, the debilitating infectious disease responsible for the paralysis and disability of millions throughout the last century.

But why are there no well-known young people's names in the above list? And why could parents in the same Indian village as the aforementioned woman rest assured that their newborns will never have to suffer the same indignities and crippling side effects of poliomyelitis?

In part, the answers stem back to Rotary's worldwide efforts alongside other organisations to end polio, which today see this infectious inflammatory disease on the verge of being eradicated - forever.



The Beginning of The End

It was 1979 when Rotary first made efforts to eradicate Polio on a widespread scale. Providing humanitarian grant funding and hands-on support from everyday Club members, the community service organisation committed to a five-year effort in partnership with the government of the Philippines to immunise about six million children against polio. Buoyed by the success of this initiative, several years later Rotary International would begin an initiative with the aim of eradicating polio worldwide.

“When Rotary International launched PolioPlus in 1985, more than 125 countries were still polio endemic, and at least a thousand children were

paralysed every day” said United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at a worldwide Rotary Convention in 2009. In 1985 there were over 350,000 cases of polio worldwide and the prognosis for many sufferers was a term of illness plagued by muscle weakness, breathing difficulties, fatigue, pain or even paralysis.

Since then, Rotary has been responsible for the immunisation of over 2 billion children worldwide. With Rotary’s work providing the catalyst for the establishment of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) in 1988, Rotary’s work alongside UNICEF, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and partners like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has led a campaign providing a total of more than 10 billion doses of the Oral Polio Vaccine (OPV) worldwide.

As a consequence of these efforts, annual diagnosed cases of polio have declined by over 99.9%, with just 291 cases recorded in 2012 and only three countries remaining polio endemic - Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan. The WHO recently estimated well over 10 million cases of polio have been averted in the last 20 years thanks to the global immunisation campaign. Those are staggering numbers, especially when contemplating the alternate prospect for many lives – confinement to crutches, leg braces, wheelchairs and negative pressure respirators (“iron lungs”), all of which have been hallmarks of different kinds of severe polio infection.

Ending Polio: As easy as bringing the Taliban and America together

Ending Polio has not been a simple task however. Eradicating the last 1% of cases has been likened to “squeezing jelly to death”, given the multi-faceted difficulties inherent in the task.

First there are the geographic and logistical issues. Reaching widely dispersed populations in remote regions in some of the world’s poorest countries is no easy task. Sheer numbers of children to immunise across a country as populous as India conspire with elements like treacherous terrains, lack of infrastructure, the availability of vaccine, the unaccountability of public health officials, mistrust of medicine and medical workers and violent, hostile or unsafe environments to make a tough venture even tougher.

The “numbers struggle” involves immunising enough children so that a community gains what is known as “herd immunity” – when enough members of the group are vaccinated that the virus struggles to find another susceptible host to infect and subsequently dies out before further transmission to a broader group is possible. In other words, without its next human host, polio ends.

Community scepticism and distrust due to political and cultural beliefs as well as local rumours, myths and religious decrees have also been key obstacles to immunisation efforts. Whether they be local fears of immunisation causing sterility in girls in Nigeria, rumours of the immunisation programs being a CIA ruse in Pakistan, or Taliban-ordered fatwas against immunisation in



Afghanistan, parental and community attitudes have been a key determinant of immunisation rates. Indeed polio immunisation workers have been threatened, beaten and killed while trying to help communities protect their own children.

While change has been slow, hope is emerging on the horizon. The effort to protect children in countries where fundamentalism and anti-Western sentiment are barriers to polio immunisation has recently been given a boost, with the Taliban renouncing its opposition to polio vaccination and publicly declaring its support for eradication efforts by polio vaccination workers.

And finally there is the financial cost, estimated at US\$1 billion dollars every year. While Rotary's contributions make up a substantial portion of the yearly global polio eradication budget (and exceed the contributions of most individual G20 nations), Rotary's advocacy has been even more influential, resulting in more than US\$7.8 billion to date in polio-specific grants from the public sector and consolidation of a partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that will see the foundation commit a further US\$1.8 billion in coming years. Rotary envisages that its own contributions to the global polio eradication effort will exceed US\$1.2 billion by the time the world is certified polio-free.

Of course that's not to mention the countless hours and resources Rotarian volunteers worldwide devote every year to ending polio, both by fundraising in local communities and working internationally at the coal-face providing oral vaccinations to children. Simply put, Rotary remains one of the easiest channels through which everyday people can get involved in fighting polio, a fight which will be won by vaccinating one child at a time.

But the costs pale in comparison to the substantial dividends that a polio-free world would gain. Financial savings from the forgone costs of treating polio could exceed \$1 billion per year, while a 2010 study published in leading medical journal *Vaccine* estimated the economic benefits of halting polio to amount to US\$40-50 billion.

Ultimately, the biggest saving wrought from eradicating polio will be the humanitarian one. Ending polio forever will be an achievement that enables millions of children to fulfil their potential and live lives free from the burden of polio-related disability – a life that all children deserve.

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