

'Polio surge in Pakistan'

Dated: May 25, 2019

APROPOS the letter 'Polio surge in Pakistan' (May 23). Indeed, this year the number of cases of polio in Pakistan has increased and the virus transmission has intensified. Pakistan's case count now stands at 19.

Of the total 19 cases, 13 have been detected from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while three were detected from Punjab and Sindh each.

Polio eradication is very simple: if you vaccinate enough children in a given area, then poliovirus has nowhere to hide and disappears from that area.

The fact that Pakistan continues to report polio cases means that we are still missing children during house-to-house vaccination campaigns.

It is important to note here that the children who contracted polio this year had not been vaccinated with OPV.

This challenge is due to many reasons, including massive population movements across the borders with Afghanistan and within the country, as well as an increase in the number of missed children due to refusals which can be attributed to the anti-vaccination propaganda circulating on social media.

In addition, the routine immunisation services are not strong. There is also a lack of safe water and sanitation, and high prevalence of malnutrition — all conditions allowing the virus to survive and paralyse vulnerable children with low immunity levels.

Right now, we are focusing on addressing any gaps in order to stop virus transmission detected in different parts of the country as soon as possible.

This includes trust-building work to help parents better understand the safety and benefits of polio vaccination and to build their resilience to misinformation.

We also continue to provide integrated packages of services for communities in core reservoir areas that include basic health services, improved access to healthcare, enhanced routine immunisation, and interventions that address sanitation issues and waste management.

We also continue to work closely with Afghanistan, with a special focus on high-risk and mobile populations moving between the two countries.

Despite the remaining challenges, we know we can get back on track to eradicate polio from Pakistan. It may take longer than we hoped for, but with sufficient resources, commitment and support from influencers including the Pakistan Paediatric Association and broader medical community in general, we can get there.

We knew that the last few steps in polio eradication would be the hardest, but we are committed to continuing vaccination campaigns until this disease is eradicated for good.

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