

Rotary International District 7010
October 1, 2021

Dear Rotarians, Rotaractors, Interactors:

When I was in grade one, a young classmate stopped coming to school. Weeks, maybe months later I found out why. She had contracted Polio. Unfortunately, she was among the 5 to 10 % who would eventually die because the Polio virus had immobilized her breathing muscles. My uncle had contracted Polio as a youth and he walked with a leg brace because his left leg was affected. Most of my generation can tell similar stories of how Polio impacted their lives.

Fortunately, these are now distant memories in Canada. My children and grandchildren, your children and grandchildren and in fact 99.9% of the world's children will not get Polio. Why? Because we are this close to eradicating Polio globally! But we must remember that Polio continues to paralyze children in parts of the world.

In 1985 when Rotary took on the task of eradicating the world of this terrible disease, more than 350,000 people a year were infected. So far this year there have been only 2 reported case of wild polio (October 2021). Afghanistan and Pakistan are the only 2 countries left that have not stopped the transmission of the wild Poliovirus. Nigeria has been Polio free since August 2016. Indeed, all of Africa is now free of the wild Polio virus.

The remaining countries face a range of challenges such as a weak health system, poor sanitation and widespread violence. We need to be aware that Polio can spread from these endemic countries to infect children in other countries that have less than adequate vaccination programs. As we have seen from the COVID virus, infections can spread quickly.

We know that polio can be eradicated. There are three strains of wild poliovirus, none of which can survive for long periods outside of the human body. This means that if the virus cannot find an unvaccinated person to infect, it will die.

The type 1 virus is localized in only 2 endemic countries. Type 2 wild poliovirus was eradicated in 1999 and the type 3 virus has not been detected since 2012. There are cheap and effective vaccines available to prevent Polio. They come in 2 forms, an oral vaccine and an inactivated Polio injection. The oral vaccine is the one most widely used because it can be administered by anyone. Rotarians from around the world have volunteered to participate in National Immunization Days. One dose of this vaccine costs about 12 cents.

Rotary has partnered with the World Health Organization, various governments, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and UNICEF to form the largest ever internationally coordinated public health effort in history. There is a global network of more than 20 million volunteers who have immunized nearly 3 billion children over the past 20 years.

When India was still polio endemic, there were 640,000 vaccination booths, 2.3 million vaccinators, 200 million doses of vaccine, 6.3 million ice packs, 191 million homes visited and 172 million children immunized: all this in just one round of the national immunization days. To eradicate polio every child must be vaccinated. We cannot stop now. We can eradicate Polio!

More than 20 years ago a little boy was the last child to be paralyzed by polio in the Americas. The Western Pacific Region was declared polio free in 2000, Europe in 2002 and in March of 2014, the South East Asia region was certified polio free. As mentioned earlier the African continent is now free of the wild Polio virus. With most of the world's population now living in Polio free regions the world can be freed of the threat of Polio.

We cannot give up. We must continue to support the Rotary Polio Plus initiative. So far this year there are only 2 cases of the wild polio virus, one each in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These are the lowest numbers ever! Unfortunately, these numbers are fragile and unless vaccines continue, we could see a resurgence of the disease.

On October 24th, let's tell our communities that Rotary is a major player in making our world Polio free.

Thanks,
Brian Menton
District 7010 Polio Chair