



WE CAN END POLIO NOW!!

At the start of a new Rotary year it is perhaps a good time to review where we have been and where we are going with PolioPlus and our attempt over so many years to eradicate for ever the scourge of the polio virus.

It is hard to realize that it was 30 years ago on the 13th of September this year that Rotary International and its Foundation undertook what at the time was uncharted territory and in the Philippines vaccinated 3 million children with oral polio vaccine much of which had been donated by Italian Rotarians. We didn't know we had just carried out a SNID, the term yet to be coined.

This, the first tentative step was a huge success leading Rotary to the development of our PolioPlus program, with much advice and yes a challenge at that time from Dr Albert Sabin to raise the funds to supply what he considered would be sufficient to supply vaccine to countries that needed it and requested it.

To this end a fund raising campaign was undertaken during the years 1985-87 with the goal of raising 120 million USD. The result was in fact we raised 247 million USD - a remarkable effort.

At the same time the World Health Assembly at their annual meeting in 1988 voted unanimously, yes unanimously to eradicate polio. It is worth therefore noting that the Polio Eradication Initiative is a program of the governments of the world and it is in the final analysis the moral duty of each country to eradicate polio from its own country

However, as in all great causes it takes more than governments to achieve such a goal. It requires support from the people of the country and organizations within each country and those organizations that have a world wide reach. For the very first time a private organization namely Rotary International officially joined the ranks of the public agencies UNICEF, World Health Organization and the US Centre for Disease Control. The result being that Rotary committed to much more than supplying vaccine but now was committed to the "certification of the eradication of circulating wild polio virus."

Rotarians throughout the more than 200 countries and geographical regions in which there are clubs continue to be committed to this effort. I believe this is

Rotary's strongest weapon in the fight to eradicate polio.

Quite apart from our fundraising successes it is the volunteer component of our work that played a significant role in the adoption of the goal of global polio eradication back in 1988. Rotarians in both the four still endemic and reinfected polio countries do everything from helping to post billboards, securing free or reduced cost TV and radio advertisements, helping to transport health workers and volunteers, monitoring campaigns, providing meals for health workers and volunteers, helping to fund the vehicles and cold chain equipment, handing out whistles, balloons or other incentives to bring children out to the immunization posts, and many, many other activities, large and small, which help support the polio eradication effort.

In recent years, many Rotarians from polio-free countries have also traveled to polio affected countries in order to help support their fellow Rotarians who are working on the front lines of the polio eradication effort. These Rotarians return to their polio-free home countries as disciples, preaching the gospel of polio eradication and the need for continued moral and financial support to finish the job.

Rotary's advocacy was also instrumental in securing a place for polio on the agenda of the 2002 G8 summit which was hosted by Canada. Polio has been on the agenda of each subsequent summit and G8 member states account for roughly half of all funding for global polio eradication.

Rotarians try to ensure that leaders in the remaining polio-affected countries – whether at the head of state level or at the community level, are engaged and focused on the goal of polio eradication. Perhaps one of the best examples of community-level engagement is the Muslim Ulema committee established by Rotary in Uttar Pradesh, India. The work of this committee has helped to overcome resistance to polio immunization by addressing misconceptions about the safety of the polio vaccine. The engagement of these community leaders has helped dramatically increase community acceptance of polio immunization efforts.

At the beginning and for many years as we all know rapid progress was made and the original 125 countries with 1000 cases a day fell to 50 countries then 20 countries and then more slowly as countries with less medical infrastructure required more help and consequently much more funding the pace slowed until just over four years ago only four countries had never stopped wild polio virus circulating. This represents a 99% success. A miracle in itself but not the goal

However and to the frustration of us all the program hit, 5 years ago, what was considered a bump in the road which unfortunately has turned out to be something of a large road block. The actual numbers each week are at www.polio-eradication.org

However no one even our naysayers can deny progress has been real and the members of the IPPC are very optimistic that this year we will see the end of "type one polio" in India. Secondly that the political climate in Nigeria has had a marked positive shift

All this requires a great deal of money and to raise the required extra funds over and above that of governments Rotary launched a second campaign in 2002-03 raising this time 135 million USD. Our goal that time was 80 million USD.

In 1996 a little know group the Polio Advocacy Group (PAG) was born, the members being representatives of Rotary, WHO UNF and UNICEF. To date this group has been responsible for raising more than 4.7 billion USD

Finally Rotarians for a third time are committed to meet the Challenge from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Gates Foundation has donated to Rotary's PolioPlus program a total of 355 million USD to which Rotary is challenged to raise in response 200 million USD to make the grand total 550 million USD.

At this time we are over to 85 million USD.

In summary to date, Rotary has provided more than US\$800 million in support of this global effort – and we will provide more than US\$1.2 billion by the time the world is certified free from polio. This contribution represents the largest private sector support of a public health initiative ever, and in the case of polio eradication, is second only to the support provided by the United States Government.

Rotary's commitment to the global polio eradication effort remains strong – sometimes even I am surprised by the depth of Rotarians' commitment. But it is not infinite. The memory of how devastating polio can be fades with each passing year – particularly in developed countries. In the remaining polio-affected countries, Rotarians, like health workers, are tired. The urgency wanes, and the frustration and lack of understanding about why we seem to remain stalled. We can END POLIO NOW