

Shares T h o u g h t s

with
Ashok Mahajan
Trustee, The Rotary Foundation

How is Rotary International involved in global polio eradication?

In the late 1970s The Rotary Foundation developed Health Hunger and Humanity Grants commonly known as 3H Grants. One of the first of these was on September 13, 1979 when some three million children were vaccinated against polio using the oral vaccine in the Philippines. Much of the vaccine was donated by Italian Rotarians. This gradually over the next few years with advice from Dr. Sabin, the inventor of the oral vaccine led to the formation of Rotary's PolioPlus programme in 1985 and the first major fundraising effort.

What is the current polio eradication status worldwide?

Polio eradication is almost 99 percent achieved with only four countries that have never eradicated the wild virus. These are India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Thousand cases a day has been reduced to 1,800 to 2,000 a year. At the time of writing at the end of July, for 2009 is 730 with India accounting for 152 as against 896 and 331 in July 2008. However it is too early to be complacent with the high season for polio approaching.

How is the GPEI (Global Polio Eradication Initiative) Partnership working towards achieving the Polio eradication goal?

The spearheading organisations are WHO, UNICEF, CDC Atlanta, USA and Rotary International. These organisations work together in the field, at intermediate level committees and at the highest levels with frequent meetings and interchange of ideas. They also work as a group to raise funds from Governments over and above the monies that Rotarians have raised over the last 24–25 years. Mention of Governments reminds me to emphasise that the eradication of polio is the responsibility of each and every government following their unanimous vote to do so in May 1988 at the annual World Health Assembly meeting. The spearheading

organisations are the means by which governments will achieve eradication.

What are the barriers to complete eradication of this disease in the endemic countries?

In my opinion the number one barrier continues to be a degree of lack of will to do it by the governments of the four remaining endemic countries. It should be noted however that all four have shown more "buy in" as evidenced again particularly in India with the very large monetary support each of the last three years by the Union Government.

There are many other partial barriers such as the generally poor health of the children which require them to have many doses to achieve immunity. However a recent decision to administer zinc tablets to improve the health of the children, is hoped, to make a substantial difference. Next, resistance by some religious groups, which now have been removed, thanks to the stimulus of Rotarians such as yourself. Ulema committees which have been formed have a great effect. Thirdly the lack of funds is a major barrier although with persistence of continued advocacy and the recent donations from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are both helping in this regard.

What progress has been made in 2009? And, has the strategy changed as you are focusing on fewer countries?

See above regarding progress.

The strategy is in the midst of a massive change to be completed by November. In recent years the plan was to concentrate in polio virus type 1 as it is more severe in its crippling effects. This has indeed reduced the number of type 1 cases by a very large number but has led to an increase in type 3. It became apparent that using monovalent vaccines although effective became a bit of a guessing game as to where to use which one. A bivalent vaccine has been formulated with both type 1 and 3 included and the field tests have shown it to be very effective and it is now in the process

of being licensed and prepared in large quantities. Thirdly the idea of “add-ons” to cover other diseases is being pursued. This has some success already in Nigeria. Lastly and perhaps most importantly is to look at the environment where most cases occur and improve particularly the water and sewer systems where the polio virus resides and from which it is transmitted. All this will help but the bottom line is to get the vaccine into the mouths of the children often enough for each environment or community to produce immunity in all the children and hence eradicate the wild virus.

Are the Governments of polio endemic countries (mostly third world countries) serious about eradicating polio? How are Rotary’s advocacy initiatives bringing about a difference in their approach towards the programme?

I believe I already answered my opinion regarding the countries’ attitudes.

Rotary has been and continues to be unique amongst the spearheading

organisations as we are free to advocate strongly to both donor and receiving countries. We usually have someone who knows the appropriate politician or bureaucrat to get in the door and make our case. However our most effective weapon is that we have absolutely refused to give up. Rotarians were those who kept the programme alive and indeed helped getting it started in India. We are and still I believe, as Bill Gates Senior said “the conscience of the polio eradication programme.” We have shown this through all our involvement at all levels from door to door to the halls of influence and have always walked the walk with our tremendous generosity.

What are the reasons for the resurgence of the disease in polio-free regions like last year even after continuous efforts to eradicate it?

The easy answer is because four countries are still exporting the virus. However the added complexity is that the

countries which import the wild virus have on their side not developed a proper routine immunisation programme and so many children are susceptible to the polio virus as well as other diseases.

What is being done to reach all children, particularly those affected by conflict?

Every effort is made by government and other groups to negotiate with the combatants and with some success. Secondly in some areas the conflict ceases for a period and with local negotiation the vaccine teams can get into these areas and vaccinate. This means that sometimes the doses may be a little close together or too far apart but the overall benefit is obvious in that at this time there have been only 15 cases in Afghanistan and 25 in Pakistan. The recent turmoil in Pakistan has in fact allowed vaccination teams into areas where previously they have been prevented from entering as well as into the refugee camps and huge numbers of children have received polio drops.



Is OPV administered in polio campaigns safe and effective?

The simple answer is yes. Millions upon millions of doses have been given to millions of children without any deleterious effect. Very occasionally a child will develop vaccine derived polio. This is always in an area where routine vaccination has been very low. Should it occur then there need to be an immediate “mop up” campaign to raise the immunity level of that community.

How long do you think the programme is going to continue? As the 2005 target date for eradicating polio has passed, and polio cases are still occurring, is global eradication really possible?

To answer your second question first. Yes polio eradication is possible. It has been eradicated in very large areas of the world and has not recurred unless imported from the four remaining countries. The country of India is a good example. It has been eradicated from the southern part for many years and only a sporadic case always traced to the north has occurred. I refuse to name a date as I have been wrong too often and each time I am wrong then the naysayers retort as the little children might say “see I told you, you couldn’t do it.”

What message would you like to give to those States in India that have successfully eradicated polio virus?

I believe to turn this around and ask the States with the virus what help they need and not as I understand at times turn down the help being offered.

Movies like ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ brought focus on India’s culture and not to mention its population reeling under poverty. Do you believe polio today is a disease of the poor and less privileged?

The polio virus attacks any child or adult no matter what their status, if they are not immune to the disease

either through being in contact with the virus or being unvaccinated.

The documentary ‘The Final Inch’ highlights the fight against Polio in this part of the world, do you think documentaries such as these and also its nomination for the Oscar has brought attention to this campaign that is no more an issue for the western audience?

I hope such documentaries help. However it is similar to all advertising or advocacy some will hear and others not. I just hope ‘The Final Inch’ helped more than many due to the publicity at the Oscars.

What support is being given to polio affected children? Is the Global Polio Eradication Initiative all about prevention and is not involved in any rehabilitation efforts for polio affected children?

The polio eradication Initiative as its name suggests is all about prevention.

However before and since it started there were and are many groups dealing with those that have suffered polio and are crippled to a larger or lesser degree. Rotarians have and continue to be involved in this work and I know that Indian Rotarians have been very involved in surgical camps to help the afflicted children. Similarly in many African countries remedial surgery has been undertaken with very beneficial outcomes.

Since the programme has been underway for such a long time there have been issues of fatigue setting in ... devoted to this cause, what personally motivates you to carry on?

Naturally with a programme that Rotarians first began to hear about 30 years ago and in earnest 25 years ago there is some fatigue. However over that time there has also been a large change in membership and each new wave that comes in to the organisation adds new life and new advocacy not to mention new dollars.

The recent entry to the Initiative by Gates undoubtedly gave us all a shot of renewed enthusiasm.

I carry on because I sincerely believe it can be done. I hate to see a child with braces or a crawler on the ground at a vaccination booth where there are excited children running around. That sight makes me carry on much more than anything else because I know it need not be.

How much fund is needed (estimation) and what other funding sources exist?

The most recent estimate is a further USD 1.7 billion! Governments must be the primary source. As mentioned in the beginning of this interview the governments voted to eradicate polio.

Millions have been invested in the programme, is it true that with continuous shifting of the target further every year, funding resources will get fatigued? How is Rotary as a funding Partner addressing the concerns expressed by other donors?

I suppose they are getting fatigued to some degree. I think more importantly the major donor governments are increasingly asking why the job is not finished. I do not think it is for Rotary to be the responder but the four governments with the continuing virus.

Also amidst today’s global meltdown and uncertainty over shrinking economy of major donors, do you think it will be possible for G8 countries and others to deliver their financial commitments towards polio eradication when there have been questions raised about them faltering on the aids promised to Africa?

You are asking a series of questions here that I do not feel qualified to respond as along with all the experts I have no idea when the economy will turn around. All we can do as Rotarians and we do so very effectively, is to continue to advocate to the governments for polio funds.

The Gates Foundation grant of US \$ 355 million towards polio eradication is the biggest grant ever to Rotary. How is Rotary planning to capitalise on this financial support for eradicating polio?

I personally believe that the biggest plus of the Challenge Grant to Rotary is the tremendous credibility it gives to the organisation. It has opened the eyes of many to just find out that Rotarians do much more than go to lunch or dinner. Now with care we can approach other organisations going forward who are, for example, interested in water and sanitation and through the Future Vision Plan work with them as perhaps, more than equal partners and as recognised leaders.

Against the Gates Challenge Grant which Rotary has committed to raise US \$ 200 million, how is Rotary standing up to this huge challenge in the present day recession period?

Not surprisingly although I continue to be amazed at the generosity of Rotarians we have crossed the USD 92 million mark as of 30th June 2009.

Is Rotary confident of meeting this Challenge?

Having been involved in the last two campaigns I have not the slightest doubt we will meet the Challenge and before 1 July 2012, the date we are contracted to meet.

Which are the agencies worldwide that have received grants from Rotary International towards eradication of polio?

WHO and UNICEF are the agencies to which we give grants. It would take too long to describe the mechanism and business plan but suffice it to note that each grant is for one year and that audits are done on a continuing basis. I believe it was our efficiency and care of these grants that allowed Gates to transfer in one tranche USD 100 million to our account.