

Kul Gautam – A History of Global Polio Eradication:

Background:

- ✍ At its peak, polio paralyzed and killed up to half a million people every year, before Jonas Salk invented a vaccine in 1955.
- ✍ The Salk inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) rapidly cut polio transmission in the United States, from 20,000 cases per year in the 1950s to around 1000 cases by the 1960s. Some Scandinavian countries relied exclusively on IPV to stop transmission, the first indication that immunization could defeat the disease.
- ✍ In 1961, oral polio vaccine (OPV) was invented by Dr Albert Sabin and introduced in the US. Sabin's strategy was to give trivalent OPV to all children under five (two doses spaced 4-6 weeks apart). From 1963, the US was using OPV in mass polio campaigns and by 1979 transmission was stopped.
- ✍ Throughout the 60s and 70s, similar mass campaigns in developing countries, most notably in Mexico, Brazil and Cuba, proved polio could also be stopped in these settings. These campaigns are still the cornerstone of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative's strategy to end polio.
- ✍ In 1979, Rotary International became involved with polio when it committed to providing OPV to six million children in the Philippines (as part of its new Health, Hunger and Humanity (3-H) programme). Spurred by the success of the programme in this and other poor countries, Rotary worked with Dr. Sabin on a plan to immunize all children against polio. This gave rise to Rotary's PolioPlus programme in 1985.
- ✍ Also in 1985, the Universal Childhood Immunization Initiative was launched jointly by UNICEF and WHO, with the aim of reducing child mortality through effective immunization. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) immediately launched an initiative to eradicate polio in the Americas by 1990.
- ✍ On the 40th anniversary of the United Nations (October 1985), Rotary announced a US\$120 million pledge to its PolioPlus programme. This funded a core group of polio experts at WHO who continue to guide the global programme. The global community was now on alert that polio could be stopped and the funds to begin the fight had been made available.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative

- ✍ In 1988, the World Health Assembly (WHA), following encouragement and funds made available by Rotary International, unanimously launched a global goal to eradicate polio by 2000 (the goal has since been moved to stopping transmission by end-2005, paving the way for global certification of eradication by 2008).
- ✍ Spearheading the fight against polio is the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, the largest public health initiative the world has ever known.
- ✍ At the time, polio was endemic in 125 countries on five continents, paralysing 350,000 children every year (1000 per day).
- ✍ Commitment to this goal was reiterated in 1990, at the World Summit for Children, by WHO, UNICEF, partner organizations and heads of state. In the same year, the Universal Childhood Immunization Initiative achieves its goal of 80 percent childhood immunization coverage worldwide.

- ✍ To date, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative has proved one of mankind's most enormous collective endeavours in war or peace. Over 17 years, at a cost of \$4 billion, it has mobilized governments, development partners, civil society, religious leaders, private sector, academic institutions and 20 million volunteers and health workers to deliver OPV to over two billion children all over the world at their doorsteps. UNICEF has supplied over 10 billion doses of OPV to support the effort.
- ✍ Polio eradication has a four-pronged strategy: national immunization days, routine immunization, mop-up of cases and disease surveillance. Several times in the last 17 years ceasefires have been agreed to allow vaccinators to reach children.
- ✍ Polio eradication has had unequivocal support of global leaders (the OIC, the AU and the G8 have pledged to provide political oversight and resources to end polio).
- ✍ Polio immunization campaigns have become a critical vehicle for delivering other health services to children. Vitamin A capsules are often given along with polio drops. In post-Taliban Afghanistan, polio vaccinators also supported the country's first birth registration campaign. Health systems and facilities strengthened by polio eradication campaigns have been used to hold measles immunization campaigns. Community education work funded by polio donors has boosted basic health and hygiene awareness in the world's poorest communities.
- ✍ Polio is now endemic in only six countries. Cases have been cut by 99 per cent, with only 1263 recorded in 2004. Polio could be stopped by end-2005.

Key dates:

- 1991** Last case of polio in The Americas;
- 1994** The Americas certified polio-free;
- 1996** "Kick Polio out of Africa" campaign launched by Nelson Mandela. By 2003, African polio had been driven back from 46 countries to 3 (Nigeria, Niger and Egypt);
- 1999** House to house polio campaigns begin;
Polio type 2 disappears;
- 2000** Kofi Annan addresses Global Polio Partners Summit, where governments pledged to achieve a polio-free world by 2005;
Western Pacific certified polio-free;
- 2002** Europe certified polio-free;
Outbreak of polio in Uttar Pradesh, India;
- 2003** Polio immunization suspended in Kano, Nigeria, leading to polio outbreak across Africa. So far, polio from Nigeria has travelled to 14 polio-free countries and re-infected six (Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Sudan);
- 2004** World's largest public health campaign takes place in Africa - a mass polio immunization campaigns across 22 countries, reaching 80 million children.

A special note on Rotary:

Rotary International's role in the global effort to eradicate polio cannot be overstated. Since Rotary first over- met its funding pledge for polio eradication in 1985 (from \$115 million to \$247 million), it has consistently fuelled the effort with resources, advocacy and genuine hard work on the ground. Rotary's advocacy efforts with both endemic and donor country governments have maintained the dream of a polio-free world over the past 20 years, and brought polio to the brink of eradication. At the same time, Rotary has been the largest private sector donor to polio eradication, committing over US\$600 million to the effort.