

Polio is a crippling and potentially fatal, infectious disease. It still strikes children, mainly under the age of five. The best protection is prevention - because there is no cure for polio.

In 1985 there were 350,000 polio cases in 125 countries. Rotary International (RI) joined forces with the World Health Organisation to initiate a programme to eradicate the Poliomyelitis (Polio) virus from all of those countries of the world where it was still rampant. At the time of that start there were 1,000 new cases being reported every week. As a measure of the success of this initiative, it is remarkable that 30 years later in 2015 there were only 74 new cases reported, and in a very limited number of countries!

Although this programme, known as 'Polio Plus', has to a great extent been successful more work is urgently needed because the Polio virus still remains in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2010 there have also been a few cases reported in Tajikistan. This outbreak was immediately countered by the emergency immunisation of 48,000 children, but it serves to emphasise that Polio is only an airline flight away! Until the Polio virus has been completely eradicated there is always a risk that fresh outbreaks may occur. The aim is to completely eradicate polio by 2019.

In 2007, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation very generously gave The Rotary Foundation \$100,000,000 and in 2009 increased this to \$355,000,000 towards Polio eradication. Rotary agreed to raise \$200,000,000 in matching funds by 2012 and actually raised \$228,700,000. The Gates Foundation subsequently agreed to match all money raised by Rotary towards Polio eradication 2 to 1. This means for every £1.00 raised, The Gates Foundation will donate £2.00.

One dose of the Polio vaccine used only costs 40 pence, but because of the living conditions in the countries where Polio is still rife it is necessary to administer as many as 8 doses over several weeks if the vaccine is to remain in the body for 48 hours despite the high incidence of diarrhoea.

Rotarians actively participate in India's National Immunisation Day on 21st February each year. The streets are flooded with Rotarians and other volunteer personnel to marshal the children and to administer doses of the vaccine, and each recipient is marked by dipping one finger in an indelible purple dye as he or she is given a gift to mark the event. A purple finger (purple pinkie) indicates that a dose has been received, so a child who has not been given a dose that day is recognisable by the lack of a 'purple pinkie' and also there is no possibility of a child 'going round again' to get more than one gift! In 2014 India was declared to be polio free.

Rotarians have helped immunize more than 7.5 billion children against polio in 122 Countries.