

Essay on Polio Eradication – A challenge

"From 1988-2005, an estimated 5 million people who would otherwise have been paralyzed will be walking because of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. Through polio eradication efforts a significant investment has been made in strengthening health service delivery systems in many countries. Hundreds of thousands of health workers have been trained, millions of volunteers have been mobilized to support immunization campaigns and cold-chain transport equipment has been refurbished"

—A Report.

"The world has a unique opportunity to end the crippling effects of polio forever".

—WHO/Jean-Marc Giroux

With the 2005 deadline to eradicate polio from the world, India, where a polio outbreak last year threatened the global eradication efforts, is intensifying measures to take on the challenge and officials assess 2003 to be the year with the lowest ever number of polio cases.

However, the optimism comes with a rider that the peak season is not yet over. So far 92 polio cases have been reported in the country of the world's 235. The figure is 41 percent lower than the previous year's 159 during the same period, officials said. Attributing the polio cases during this January and February to last year's fallout, they said cases in January alone were more than half the total number so far this year. "In fact, this year may turn out to be better than any year before," they added. However, the peak season (May to

September), is not yet over. “We are keeping our tin gets crossed.”

The fall in numbers offers an opportunity and necessitates extra efforts so there are no cases in 2005. In 2004, the world has its best— and perhaps at a final stage to stop polio forever. There is a historic, one-time-only opportunity to stop the transmission of poliovirus. If the world seizes this opportunity and acts immediately, no child will ever again know the crippling effects of this devastating disease.

After a fifteen-year effort that has galvanized more than 200 countries, 20 million volunteers, and international investment of US \$3 billion, the success or failure of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, the world’s largest public health campaign is now within reach. Never before has the world been so close to success, with only six countries remaining polio-endemic.

On 15 January 2004, Ministers of health from the six polio-endemic countries –Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Niger, Afghanistan, and Egypt publicly pledged an all-out effort to end a disease that in recent memory crippled more than a thousand children every day. Ministers gathered at WHO Headquarters to sign the Geneva Declaration for the Eradication of Poliomyelitis, marking a historic step toward stopping poliovirus transmission in their countries by the end of 2004.

The world has a one-time chance to finish this job once and for all – to protect our collective investment. Dr. LEE Jong-wook, WHO Director-General, said.

In 2004, the world will face unprecedented risks if it does not immediately rein in poliovirus. In Western Uttar Pradesh in India, for example, there are still new cases of polio. Poliovirus exports also pose an ever-present threat, particularly in West Africa. In

2003, a polio outbreak in Nigeria spread to neighboring polio-free countries presenting a “grave public health threat”. Children in these countries are particularly vulnerable, as a lack of funds in some has resulted in a stop to immunization campaigns, leaving millions of children at risk of being infected by the devastating poliovirus.

The stakes could not be higher – or more urgent – for the entire world, most especially, its children. The next six months of vaccination activities will be pivotal to stopping transmission everywhere in 2004. These activities could seal the fate of the international community’s efforts to eliminate polio forever.

If the world is to secure its fifteen-year investment in polio eradication and protect all children from the threat of this disease, each and every child under five must be reached with polio vaccine during upcoming campaigns in the key endemic countries.

Never before has commitment and effort been so focused on this final push to rid the world of polio. Not only is the world on the verge of reaching a global health goal – but the eradication of polio will also leave behind a legacy of what can be achieved through an extraordinary demonstration of global cooperation.

India is one of only seven countries to remain infected by polio. Successful immunization campaigns are crucial to ensuring the eradication of this crippling disease.

In 2002, the epidemic – the largest in the world since the Global Polio Eradication Initiative began in 1988—spread across northern India, resulting in a six-fold increase in new cases over 2001. Uttar Pradesh was especially hard to hit, with the State now accounting for 64% of all new polio cases worldwide Of particular concern is the

fact that the epidemic spread from Uttar Pradesh to previously polio-free areas within India, as well as to other countries. For example, polio transmission has been re-established in the Indian States of Gujrat and West Bengal and in January 2003, a child was paralyzed by polio in Lebanon for the first time in nearly ten years. Genetic sequencing of this virus confirmed it was from India.

“We have 15 years of experience in polio eradication,” said, Brundtland. “We have the tools and we have the strategies to finish this job. Today there is simply no moral or economic justification for any child anywhere in the world to be crippled by polio.”

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative is spearheaded by WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and UNICEF.

The poliovirus is now circulating in only seven countries around the world, reduced from over 125 when the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was launched in 1988. The seven countries with indigenous wild poliovirus are (from highest to lowest risk): India, Nigeria, Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Niger, and Somalia.

Tremendous progress has been made in the global fight against polio since 1988 when the World Health Assembly resolved to eradicate the disease. The number of polio cases worldwide has decreased from 350 000 in 1988, to under 700 cases in 2003. Three-quarters of all cases globally are linked to a handful of polio “hot spots” in Nigeria, Pakistan, and India.

In addition, despite the high infection season, transmission levels are at an all-time low in India, Egypt, and Afghanistan. Following an epidemic that spread like wildfire in 2002, India’s success in reducing poliovirus transmission in 2003 demonstrates that with high-

quality vaccination campaigns, where every child is immunized with multiple doses, polio can be beaten.

If no case status is maintained for three years, India would get the eradication certificate. The officials said the government was not lacking in efforts—it was spending Rs 600 crore in polio eradication efforts this year. Of this Rs, 400 crore is international aid while the rest is World Bank loan. India has shown very good progress in the eradication of Polio since 2002. Let us hope the world will be certainly free from the dreaded disease by 2005, and no child will ever be crippled by this shameless disease.