

Opinion: Time to eradicate polio

By William Keenan and Robert Block, *Huffington Post*

Few pediatricians in the U.S. are old enough to have experienced the fear of the polio epidemics of the 1940s and 1950s. Without the ability to protect our children, society was defenseless in the face of this terrifying disease. Today, thanks to groundbreaking scientific discoveries, we've broken away from the grip of polio. Armed with effective vaccines, pediatricians, partner organizations and front-line workers around the globe have eliminated 99 percent of all new polio cases.

Last month, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon convened a group of global leaders, including Bill Gates and heads of state of polio-affected countries to renew the commitment to eliminate polio. This show of solidarity reminds us that the fight is not finished. In several parts of the world, the devastating effects of polio continue to be a reality for children, families and doctors. We can't afford to lose sight of this remaining 1 percent of polio cases. With only three countries where transmission has never been stopped – Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria – polio is facing defeat. There are fewer cases in fewer districts of fewer countries than at any previous time. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change history, and we must act now.

The International Pediatric Association, and our national members, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, work on a range of priorities that affect child survival in developing countries, including HIV/AIDS, malaria, pneumonia, and diarrhea. While polio no longer affects as many children as it used to, we have not forgotten the urgent need to eliminate this disease while we have the chance. The effort has major

implications for children's health and mortality: it's proof positive that critical health services can safeguard children living in even the hardest-to-reach places. Pediatricians have witnessed how these efforts help bring primary care service within reach of nearly every single child on the planet – not just with polio vaccines, but with other preventive interventions such as measles, rotavirus and pneumococcal vaccines, Vitamin A supplements and bed nets.

We see the long-term successes of polio eradication efforts across the globe. In September, more than 32,000 children in Pakistan's conflict-affected Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area received polio vaccines for the first time since 2009, and measles and pentavalent vaccines for the first time ever. In 2011, India – once considered one of the most challenging places in the world to eradicate polio – was declared polio-free. In India, the polio eradication program helped establish systems to identify and vaccinate every newborn and strengthened other preventive health services.

But these programs need funding. Tragically, funding gaps have led to cancelled and scaled-back vaccination campaigns in 24 countries, leaving children vulnerable and threatening progress. The polio virus, by its nature, is extremely difficult to contain; unless the polio eradication program is fully funded and the disease eradicated, polio will return to countries that are now polio-free.

Recognizing the benefits of success and the risks of failure, the global community has united around a Polio Global Emergency Action Plan to improve vaccination campaign quality, protect every last child and ensure accountability. We must all ensure that the solidarity demonstrated at the UN leads to the political will and financial support needed to put this plan into action. At this crucial juncture, leaders at home and elsewhere must invest in the long-term resources to bring about polio eradication. It can be done.

American pediatricians and families are fortunate to have made polio history in our country. Let's remind our leaders that we must do what we can so that our colleagues around the world will never again have to treat a child with polio.

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