

Community Comment 5/13/2013

By Jon Sapper

“Are There Lessons For Us With The Polio Eradication Effort?”

About twenty-five years ago, there was a group of folks who got together and said, “You know, there are over 350,000 new cases of polio every year in 125 countries crippling children around the world . We need to get rid of it.” Well, from that humble beginning, The World Health Organization, Rotary International, UNICEF, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, countries and others came together and have worked hard to wipe out this disease.

A team of Rotarians recently traveled to Nigeria distributing the polio vaccine to thousands of children. They said and I quote, “We shared a life changing experience together in more ways than one. What we did changed the lives of the Nigerian children and mothers who saw foreigners coming to their country to place two drops of a lifesaving vaccine in the mouth of their child. What we saw and what we did are indelibly etched in our minds, hearts and souls. I believe we are all better human beings for this experience.”

As described by a Rotarian, volunteering for this work can come with a price. Several months ago, 16 volunteers were killed in Pakistan and two months ago, 9 nurses and 3 physicians were killed in Nigeria. These polio workers travel through places of desperation and distress, through every slum, war zone, and refugee camp with only one mission in mind: to reach as many children as possible. These coordinated attacks sent a chilling message to civil society that these volunteers, protected before by a strict moral code, were now terrorist targets. Yet, the volunteers still go, because they are guided by a sense of purpose larger than who they are as individuals.

Because of the sacrifices of those who have participated in the global immunization effort, including hundreds of thousands of Rotarians, polio is on the brink of extinction. Now, there are only 3 countries with polio; Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria. Only 26 new cases have been reported in 2013, half the number from last year at this time.

The goal is for a polio free world by 2018. There is already a post-eradication plan in place to make sure this disease doesn't start again once it is gone. And it will be gone soon. What an incredible effort! It shows the power of what can happen when people come together around a common cause with a relentless commitment to see things through to the end.

Yes, it started from a few folks coming together about 25 years ago and look what has happened in that short period of time. Do you think it's possible to end childhood poverty, end homelessness or develop a strong economy in our area? Certainly it is. But it will take the same degree of unwavering commitment locally that has been shown on a world scale to eliminate polio.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.