

# **POLIO FREE PAKISTAN: A GOAL YET TO BE ACHIEVED**

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Poliomyelitis is a highly contagious disease that can lead to severe disability but it is preventable by vaccination and improved standards of living. It spreads from person to person via faecal-oral route. It can lead to acute flaccid paralysis (AFP), a crippling condition. Fortunately only 1% of those infected face paralysis and the rest are either symptomless or recover after running fever and flu like symptoms within a week.<sup>1</sup>

At present Pakistan, Nigeria and Afghanistan are the three countries having endemic polio. Pakistan polio incidence approaches 300 cases as the year 2014 comes to an end. In Pakistan initially routine expanded program of immunization (EPI) starting in 1974 controlled the disease but later on cases started to rise due to lapses in the program. Polio vaccination campaigns have been interrupted in the various regions of the country like Federally administered tribal areas (FATA), the neighboring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (KPK) and Karachi due to many reasons, with violent attacks on the polio workers as one of the worst.<sup>2</sup> Due to countless children remaining unvaccinated, the above mentioned areas have become a major polio reservoir.<sup>3,4</sup>

World Health Assembly (WHA) in 1988 passed the resolution for polio eradication by the year 2000 with national immunization days (NIDs) to all children less than 5 years age.<sup>5</sup> In May 2014, WHA declared Polio spread as 'Global Public Health Emergency of International Concern' (PHEIC). WHO has warned Pakistan, if it did not contain polio virus, travel and visa restrictions could be imposed by the international community. Global community is showing concern over widespread prevalence of polio virus in Pakistan as it can spoil billions of dollars invested in polio eradication and ultimately leave millions of children vulnerable once again.

Special travel advisory for Pakistani pilgrims by

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Saudi Arabia is an example in which all the pilgrims are vaccinated before leaving and after arriving at Saudi airports. Similarly all Pakistani airports have been equipped with mandatory anti-polio vaccination counters.<sup>6,7</sup>

It is high time to review our performance and reassess the causes of failure to ensure polio free Pakistan. Despite the adverse situation, we are struggling for polio-free Pakistan with the support of the international community. Where high number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has created the chances of more spread of polio, it has also created an opportunity to vaccinate the previously inaccessible community.<sup>8</sup>

Various recommendations if applied strictly and simultaneously all over the country will help to eradicate the polio. These include high quality EPI coverage to every child rather than to depend on NIDs, motivation and training of workers through workshops, countering the propaganda against polio vaccination, high risk groups coverage especially in disaster areas like IDPs and floods, public awareness using community participation, and constant re-evaluation of our current strategies and present programs.

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