Why Polio Still Matters

Polio is a highly infectious disease of the digestive track that can lead to paralysis. While Polio mainly impacts children under five, anyone can become infected with Polio. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt contracted paralytic polio at age 39. Although there is no cure, the disease is entirely preventable with a safe, effective vaccine. Polio virus is primarily found in human waste, so areas without effective sanitation and safe water are at highest risk.

For North Americans, Polio may be seen as a relic of the past, but ask anyone alive in the 1950's, and they will likely share vivid stories of deadly polio outbreaks and grade schoolers in iron lungs. Children across the USA lined up in their thousands to test Dr. Salk's new Oral Polio Vaccine when it was first introduced. Youngsters in other parts of the globe have not been so lucky. The world amassed 350,000 new cases of Polio annually into the late 1980's, when the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was launched by Rotary and its partners. Since then, more than 3 billion children have been immunized against Polio and an estimated 20 million people are walking today who would have otherwise been paralyzed. Together, we have reduced wild Polio cases by 99.9%.

While we have made tremendous progress, we must strive forward to keep our promise to the world's children and remove polio from the planet forever. Achieving this goal will also keep everyone safe from Polio, as recent reports of Polio virus found in Western water supplies make clear. With the ease of international travel and increased vaccine hesitancy, the risk of an outbreak is ever present. Keep in mind that while only one out of a hundred polio infections causes paralysis, the remaining 99 "silent" cases are also infectious to others. Like they say, Polio anywhere could mean Polio everywhere.