

Dr. J.W. Lee
World Health Organization director-general

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 1979, the year Rotary first immunized children in the Philippines, your vision of a world without polio was extremely bold.

Rotary's vision was especially bold for the Western Pacific region, where I used to work and where I would discuss with Rotarians the work ahead. In no area would the challenges of reaching all children be so great. Here we faced the most populous nation on earth, China. Here we faced one of the most conflict-troubled countries in the world, Cambodia. Here we faced some of the most remote human settlements in the world. After the successful eradication of polio in the Americas, the Western Pacific was indeed the litmus test for whether the polio strategies could work everywhere. In the early 1990s, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and CDC joined hands with Rotary in this region to face these challenges together. The results of this partnership have been extraordinary: The Western Pacific region is now certified polio-free.

It was 15 years ago in that Western Pacific region that I began my long engagement with Rotary and Rotarians, an engagement that continues to this day. It was there that I spent long days working on polio eradication alongside Rotarians from the region and senior Rotary leaders, and I gained a true sense of how valuable Rotary was as a partner and what Rotary can accomplish. You have mobilized communities with the help of thousands of volunteers. You have motivated national and local governments to fully commit to polio eradication, hesitant parents to immunize their children, and warring factions to lay down their arms so vaccinators can pass.

[The year] 2005 is a very important anniversary for Rotary and for me personally as well. Ten years ago, I first met Rotarian Bill Sergeant, who has been a truly great friend and colleague. As chairman of the International PolioPlus Committee, he is also the perfect symbol of Rotary's role in this historic effort.

Eradicating polio will be an achievement that you will tell your children about, and they in turn will tell theirs, for you have given a universal and timeless gift. You will tell them that you built, individual by individual, the template of what a model private-public partnership looks like. When that term was in its infancy, you defined what such a partnership means, how a private civic organization can spark an idea to rid the world of polio, how government support can nurture that idea and international technical know-how make it a reality. Every day, I hear from groups that want to form partnerships, and I hear about dozens of new partnerships every year. But the polio partnership is like no other. Stable and productive like a good marriage, it has lasted for nearly 20 years, built strategies, and carried out campaigns, and is now near its goal.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently termed the Global Polio Eradication Initiative "a shining model of international cooperation." In this day of challenging the models of internationalism, it is good to remember those joint ventures that do work. Here in Chicago, we are gathered from all over the world, and we have eradicated polio from large parts of that world. We could not have done that without international cooperation. Very soon, when we identify the last child on earth to contract polio, it will be a success for the international community to celebrate together.

Rotary has provided the vision and the sheer human power in the form of its millions of volunteers and its advocates. You worked in the booths vaccinating children, you went house-to-house even in the most difficult conditions, you organized large rallies to motivate parents and communities, you spoke up on polio in every media outlet, and you convinced many mothers and fathers to protect their children through vaccinations. Thank you very much.

If you weren't out there involved in vaccinating children, then you were lobbying your local politicians, your state representatives, or your national governments to strengthen their commitment to eradicate polio. You challenged your elected bodies to act, to become involved, and to take ownership. A dream like this cannot succeed without government ownership and without someone like Rotary working with those governments.

The world's largest coordinated peacetime activity cannot succeed without adequate financial resources. Here again Rotarians have led the way. Your generosity has been simply extraordinary. Rotarians have reached into their own pockets to come up with a sum that dwarfs the contributions of most governments: US\$600 million. You baked pies, ran races, sold books, and ran auctions, raising funds in every traditional and innovative way known to mankind. These funds have been critical for the world's poorest countries and communities to plan and carry out campaigns effectively, procure oral polio vaccine, establish disease surveillance systems, set up laboratories, and respond to emergencies as they occur.

It is the steadfast resolve of the more than one million Rotarians in 168 countries that has brought us so close to realizing the dream of polio eradication. Without the vision and sustained guidance of Rotarians, polio would still be stalking children on every continent.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You have so much to be proud of. Globally, polio cases have dropped from 1,000 cases per day to fewer than a thousand in the entire year, a decrease of more than 99 percent. More than five million children who would have been paralyzed by polio are walking today because of your efforts. We have prevented the deaths of 1.2 million children by the addition of vitamin A drops in our campaigns.

So, polio is down to a few hotspots on only two continents, Africa and Asia. And in one of these endemic areas, South Asia, we are close to stopping polio forever. In an Afghanistan rebuilding itself from decades of conflict, vaccinators trek for miles to make sure every child, even in the remotest parts, receives polio vaccine. In Pakistan, where it is often difficult to reach the youngest children within a home, teams of trusted locals now act as vaccinators. In India, the most populous of the endemic countries, the tireless efforts of Rotarians and the exemplary backing of the government have finally managed to overcome all the obstacles so that now enough children are being reached enough times to stop polio by the end of this year.

Recently, you may have read about polio's spread to countries that no longer have it — Yemen and Indonesia. This is why we embarked on the road to eradication. Once polio is stopped everywhere, no child anywhere will suffer from imported virus. The final push to kick polio out of Africa and Asia has to be an urgent and intense push.

In Africa, the African Union responded to the outbreak in 2004 by conducting synchronized polio campaigns in 24 countries that reached approximately 100 million children. This series of vaccination campaigns was the largest-ever internationally coordinated operation in peacetime. Rotary was instrumental in ensuring that presidents and prime ministers participated in the launch

and renewed their commitment to stop polio in Africa. As a result this year, West and Central Africa have reported the lowest level of polio cases in three years.

Rotarians,

Because of Rotary, we have completed 99 percent of our task. To achieve the last 1 percent, we need Rotary's continuing advocacy more than ever, to ensure that all national governments — both of polio-affected countries and donor countries — are fully committed to eradicating polio and to meeting their financial obligations. Rotary has done its part, and I challenge donor governments and members of the G8, the European Union, and the Organization of [the] Islamic Conference to fulfill their commitments and quickly come forward with multiyear pledges so we can finish this job.

The end is in sight, and we need the global community to accompany us to every household and reach every child with the vaccine. We need the polio-affected and polio-free countries to show the same resolve that Rotary has shown. We are in this until the end, until this mission, set forth 20 years ago, becomes a reality for every child in every country and in every continent for all future generations. With your energy, support, and unparalleled dedication, I know we will make this a reality.