

PolioPlus Update

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This is one of the most exciting times in history to be a Rotarian. Why? Because you are standing on the precipice of accomplishing one of the greatest dreams that humanity has ever envisioned: the global eradication of polio! At this time in history, you're in the home stretch, you're walking the last mile, but it's not proving to be easy. I'll talk today about what's happening with polio around the world, but also why I believe success in this endeavor depends not on a huge global service organization but rather on the *individuals* within it. I am a believer that Rotary accomplishes so much because of the power of one.

So, I ask each of you: Why are you in this organization? Why did you want to become a Rotarian? Why do you care so much about other people and issues like polio? I'm willing to bet it's because sometime, somewhere, someone in your life was your champion, your cheerleader, your mentor. This person made you believe that you were special and uniquely talented.

Who was that person? I'll bet you see them right now in your mind's eye. Perhaps it was a parent or a sister or brother, maybe a teacher or a friend. For me, it was my father and mother, Ted and Mary. I was their middle child and grew up in the Midwest in a modest home. We were rich when it came to love but not material wealth. We always had food and new shoes for school, but we certainly weren't rich. Yet my father used to say to me quite often: "To whom much is given, much is expected."

It took me quite a while to figure out exactly what that meant. It began to make sense when I traveled for the first time with Rotary to Ethiopia in 2002. I was invited by an amazing individual, Ezra Teshome, a Seattle Rotarian who grew up in Ethiopia. Every year, Ezra leads around 50 people to his homeland to participate in an NID, or National Immunization Day. Ezra is one man who is making a huge difference. He takes his team all over Ethiopia, giving drops to the village kids and learning a lot about a very different culture. Ezra is changing not only the lives of the people in his native country but *especially* the lives of those who travel with him.

I'm hooked. Since 2002, I've gone back seven times, even taking my husband one year, and the year after, our 17-year-old daughter, Molly. That was the best gift I ever gave my daughter.

Although my responsibility on these trips is to deliver television reports on polio, I occasionally would put my camera down and get to put those two precious drops of vaccine in a child's mouth myself. Now that's an amazing feeling — knowing the little one in your arms will never get polio!

We had many adventures on the back roads, and I especially loved meeting all those adorable children. They taught me so much about family closeness and how to be happy with very little.

In February last year, a big dream of mine came true. I had the privilege of going to India for an NID with Past District Governor Anil Garg of District 5240 in California. We traveled to some very remote villages in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Anil is a native of India who has been leading trips back to his homeland since the year 2000. Soft spoken and gentle, it might be easy to underestimate him. But Anil is quietly powerful. He meets with India's community leaders, encourages them to keep up the fight, greatly increases the visibility of the PolioPlus program in his bright yellow jacket, and inspires all. His team members are excited to tackle all sorts of projects of their own after traveling with him. The power of one.

I'm curious: How many people here have participated in an NID, a National Immunization Days polio campaign?

The polio mission is the heart, the very center, the core of what Rotary is all about. As a reporter, I've loved telling your story, how in 1985 you decided to take on a gigantic, noble mission: to see polio eradicated from the face of the earth! Not long after, other partners joined the cause: the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Also in the fight, various governments of the world. And just when funding was starting to dwindle and the momentum was slowing down, an exciting new partner entered the scene: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Because the Gates Foundation is located in Seattle, I've spoken with many people inside the organization, including Bill Gates Sr. and others working on polio eradication. They all praise Rotary's leadership and commitment. The foundation could have given those two huge polio grants totaling US\$355 million to other organizations, such as WHO or UNICEF, but no! The grants were given to *you*, Rotary! Why? Because the Gates Foundation knows you are the ones who took the lead and continue to be their most powerful partner in the polio battle. They are very impressed with your pledges to match their grants, too.

On the Gates Foundation website, I found this quote from Bill Gates himself: "The world would not be where it is without Rotary, and it won't get where it needs to go without Rotary."

Let's recap quickly: *Impressive progress* has been made since 1985. Back then, 125 countries were battling polio, with the world seeing 350,000 new cases every year. Now, in 2010, we are down to *four* endemic nations and less than 2,000 cases globally every year. What an incredible accomplishment! Let's applaud that!

So now it comes down to the final four: Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. The challenges in each remaining nation are unique. Let's take a look at them.

First, Nigeria. The challenges here are huge. In 2003, northern Nigeria suspended its polio immunization program for a year because of rumors that the vaccine was unsafe. As a result, the Nigerian strain spread quickly, reinfected dozens of previously polio-free countries in Africa. International health organizations and others, including Bill Gates himself, have visited Nigerian leaders and are working diligently to improve coverage. But the sad fact remains that many children are still not getting vaccinated for a variety of reasons. Both type 1 and type 3 strains of polio are active in Nigeria. New rounds of vaccinations targeting all virus types were administered last year in the hopes of containing the most recent outbreak. The latest word is that political, religious, and community leaders are now becoming highly involved in the polio program. Progress is being made.

Pakistan: Security problems and political instability are big problems here, as well as lack of infrastructure. Many remote areas have been difficult to access until recently. New cases have been reported in some areas that were previously polio-free. Of all things, though, cell phone technology is now reportedly playing a role in the immunization program. Medical teams are actually texting people in far off villages, notifying them of upcoming NIDs!

Afghanistan: War has a way of getting in the way of immunization campaigns. Afghanistan has similar problems to Pakistan, such as poor infrastructure, but aerial attacks, suicide bombings, and assassinations create huge obstacles for vaccination teams trying to reach remote villages. However, even the Taliban has a vested interest in protecting their children against polio, so Days of Tranquility are declared so that vaccinators can come in and do their jobs without having to dodge bullets and bombs.

Last but not least, India. India is special to me, since I was there a year ago for an NID. It's crowded, chaotic, and colorful. The challenges to getting rid of polio here are enormous. First of all, it's a nation of more than one billion people. In the northern states, where polio is most prevalent, some 8,000 babies are born every day. Other obstacles include poor sanitation, disease, and lack of clean drinking water. But this is a nation where both the government and ordinary citizens are determined to see polio banished forever. Many health experts believe that if polio can be wiped out in India, despite its huge challenges, then it can be conquered anywhere!

Now, as part of Anil Garg's team, we got to see both sides of the battle — the triumphs and the tragedies. In the tiny village of Sohi, we made a sad discovery. A little girl named Minakshi, a year and a half old, had been stricken with polio just a few months earlier. Her grandmother showed us how one of her little arms was flaccid and useless. The grandmother asked Anil, "Do you have any medicine that will make her better?" Anil had to explain that for polio, there is no cure. Little Minakshi had somehow slipped through the cracks.

The good part of this story is that this is actually a rare thing in India. The country has an impressive record of reaching every child, despite its gigantic population and isolated villages. In Bihar, we traveled to a distant area cut off every year by sweeping floods. We drove over extremely rough roads, crossed a river by boat, and finally walked on foot to reach the remote village of Sughrain. Here, we saw several vaccination teams hard at work. It was an honor to meet these polio warriors, look into their faces, and know these are the individuals who will never give up until polio is gone. In the city of Patna, I will never forget a man named Nakul Prasad. In his yellow vaccination vest, Nakul dashed around the railway platforms, checking little fingers for the telltale black mark, making sure every child under five was vaccinated. He was absolutely tireless. He only stopped a few seconds so I could take his picture, and then he was off again, peering into rail cars, checking fingers, giving the drops, and quickly moving on.

The individual makes the difference.

I'd like to quote an outstanding individual who really sums it all up — Bill Gates Sr., cochair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In his new book, *Showing Up for Life*, Gates devotes an entire chapter to Rotary and the daunting challenge it undertook to eradicate polio worldwide. In it, he states:

More than twenty years ago, when most volunteer efforts were aimed at solving problems that existed down the street, Rotary took on a global fight that nobody believed they could win — the fight to end polio worldwide. Since then, Rotary has revolutionized our thinking for the possibilities that exist for ordinary people to significantly change the world.

Rotary made a promise to the children of the world back in 1985, and that promise must be kept. As an individual leader within a very large and powerful organization, what will you do? Remember: To whom much is given, much is expected.

I conclude today with some final images of India and Ethiopia, edited to a song sung by American artist Mary Chapin Carpenter. It's called "10,000 Miles." I chose it because, as Rotarians, you have certainly gone 10,000 miles and more to end polio. Now is the time to walk that last mile, so we can all see a world that is finally polio-free.