

Polio Free Pakistan: Reality or Dream?

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Polio is one of the diseases which is incurable but can be prevented. Polio virus when invades nervous system through blood stream, causes Acute Flaccid Paralysis (AFP) the person's life become cripple. Many epidemics are caused by poliovirus in the last three centuries; European and North American were the target initially, currently most cases are reported from Asia & Africa.¹ It is estimated that all over the world about 100,000 new children are infected by polio virus every year, fortunately a small fraction develops active polio disease.

Pakistan is among three countries² where poliomyelitis (polio) is still categorized as an endemic viral infection.³ Expanded program of immunization against childhood tuberculosis, Poliomyelitis, Diphtheria, Pertussis, Measles and Tetanus was launched in Pakistan with the support of World Health Organization (WHO) in 1974⁴ which is now further expended with inclusion of Hepatitis B and H. Influenza. Initially results of EPI programme found promising with decline in the polio cases. Later over the years, the progress against polio virus became eclipsed. After three decades, the coverage rate against polio is only 77% which is self explanatory.⁵

Realizing alarming situation, world health assembly in 1994 passed resolution for global eradication of polio by the year 2000 with supplementary immunization doses of polio to be administered to children less than 5 years of age through National Immunization Days (NID's). Pakistan, India, Nigeria and Afghanistan frequently organize NID's for oral polio vaccination to achieve the goal of polio free world. Pakistan is far away from target set by WHO and we failed to completely eradicate polio from Pakistan. At the time of publication, in the current year, five (05) cases of polio are reported from the country, one from Karachi-Sindh⁶, one from Punjab and three from Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa. Reason is probably obvious, as Polio virus had been detected in sewerage lines of Hyderabad and Karachi.⁷

It is high time to review the outcome and performance of our struggle against polio and to determine the causes of failure. During current year, 1st confirmed reported case of polio (AFP) is from Karachi, having health facilities more than any other city of the country. The only worse can be expected from other remote, under developed, thickly populated areas having scanty health facilities particularly NWFP and Baluchistan. Apparently frequent migration from borders of Afghanistan, tough cold weather in the winter season, geo political situation, unemployment, eco-

conomic hardship, illiteracy and campaign against polio vaccine by religious fundamentalist are the factors responsible for the failure. Recent killing of polio worker's in the different part of country and unforeseen natural disaster (floods and rain with millions of Internally Displaced Person IDP's) during past few years in the country has also adversely affect NIDs. In certain areas reported cases with history of immunized children developed active polio is another question mark for quality of vaccine, transportation, maintaining cold chain for the vaccine till administered. All together these problems make the task to achieve the goal of polio free Pakistan more difficult. In the year 2011 the highest numbers of polio cases (198) among polio endemic countries were reported from Pakistan, mostly from NWFP, Baluchistan provinces, FATA and Karachi (Gadap, Buldia and Gulshan-e-Iqbal). Although figure dropped to 58 during 2012, we must not feel comfortable as 5 cases during current year has been reported so far and figure is sufficient evidence for the alarming condition that still persist in Pakistan.

Though NID's are very effective and have substantially reduced the number of polio cases of all types including Wild Poliovirus (WP) 1, 2 and 3. Our poor performance is evident from the fact that we had taken 19 years (1993-2012) to reduced number of reported cases from 1803 in 1993 to 58 in 2012. More significantly we are not in a position to answer the question that after how much years we will be POLIO FREE.

Now question arises what to do to cope this serious threat to country. Various suggestions are under consideration by government, donor agencies and global partners. What is more important is that all these should be implemented simultaneously and strictly if goal of polio free Pakistan is to be achieved. These include,

- Utmost attention upon regular EPI Programme to cover every child rather than depending upon NID's.
- Accountability in the areas reporting positive cases, responsibility must be fixed with determination of cause of failure and prompt solution to cause.
- Independent monitoring board for evaluation may report with more reliability and give suggestions to cope up with the situation.
- Utmost try to cover all children less than 5 year of age with special attention to areas of positive cases and from where migration is day to day practice.
- High level commitment and emotional attachment

of authorities and every worker with this program which may be enhanced by seminars provoking sense of responsibility.

- Availability of quality vaccine, its storage, proper transportation and maintaining cold chain till its administration.
- All schools may be bound to ensure that all children less than 5 year of age are fully vaccinated by asking parents to produce vaccination card at the time of admission.
- Polio vaccine should be available at all pediatric clinics and all hospitals of private sector, and it is ensured that every attending child under 5 years is vaccinated for polio.
- The worker carrying out campaign against polio must be secured and provided with good transport and appropriate vaccine handling system.
- Drive a campaign against the fundamentalist forces propagating negatively against polio and attacking polio workers.
- Electronic, print media, religious scholars, clerks, teachers, NGO's, civil society may be involved more affectively with sense to own this program.
- Frequent seminars, symposia and walk should be arranged more frequently for public awareness.
- Close association and good effective plans in collaboration with international donors and program partners.
- Special teaching program and sittings with family from which case is reported and the neighbor of the family to aware them about polio transmission routes and further spread of the virus.
- Emergency and affective polio vaccine drive during the national disasters, especially coverage of

the migrated and affected people in the camps.

- Proper isolation of positive cases, medical and moral support to effected child and family.
- Prevent the illegal immigrants from the borders especially of endemic countries.

Before conclusion it is very important to mention that the positive political will is above all important and hope government will fully utilize all the available resources and think tanks to win this battle against polio and we assume that polio free Pakistan is reality of the near future not merely a dream.

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