
Director's Letter



ONE MORE STEP

In 1985 PAHO's Directing Council approved a plan of action to eradicate indigenous transmission of wild poliovirus in the Region of the Americas. It was a daring goal, for it involved mobilizing almost US\$500 million in the midst of an economic crisis, integrating new strategies into routine health care activities, and decentralizing polio surveillance to the community level—all before the target date for eradication of 1990. There were some who doubted the feasibility of the initiative and branded those of us who backed it as impractical dreamers. However, the last four years have seen the commitment to eradicate poliomyelitis give added impetus to the Expanded Program on Immunization. The incidence of diseases targeted by that program has been diminishing yearly, and in 1988 an all-time high was reached in immunization coverage with all EPI vaccines. Poliovirus circulation is now believed to be confined to less than 2% of the municipalities in Latin America and the Caribbean, and this estimate comes at a time when intense surveillance has made notification much more efficient than ever before. Less than 50 confirmed cases due to wild poliovirus transmission are projected for 1989 in the Americas, fewer cases than are anticipated in Europe.

The determination displayed by the thousands of persons who have dedicated themselves to conquering this disease inspires and moves us. History often pays heed only to the exploits of great military and political leaders, but the battle to eradicate from the face of the earth a cause of so much suffering is worth far more than the feats that usually garner fame and medals.

Although we cannot yet say that we have defeated polio, the goal is in sight. For the countries still affected, its proximity should strengthen their resolve to persevere, with a sense of urgency, in their planned strategies and to redouble their efforts so as not to lose ground. When we are able to announce to the world that polio has disappeared from the countries of the Americas, it will be a signal that the hour has arrived to set up new challenges. We must then dedicate ourselves without delay to the eradication of measles, neonatal tetanus, and other diseases that are preventable with easily applied techniques. Once we have this victory in hand, let us remember that our commitment to improve health and well-being will always require taking one more step.



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