



### THE DEFEAT OF POLIO

Fortunately, history is repeating itself. In 1971, the Region of the Americas witnessed its last case of smallpox, and 20 years later, in 1991, we saw what we hope will prove to be the last case of paralytic poliomyelitis in the hemisphere. Although we cannot yet formally declare polio's disappearance, every passing day without a case report fuels the hope that this terrible scourge of childhood is vanquished for good. We have reason to feel proud and, above all, grateful to have once more played a leading role in the inspiring drama of disease eradication. By saying "we" I mean not only the staff of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau but everyone involved in the effort—from the collaborating agencies (Canadian Public Health Association, United States Agency for International Development, Inter-American Development Bank, Rotary International, and UNICEF) to the countries themselves, and especially the national health workers. We find ourselves a small step away from one of the most important public health achievements in history because of an united, interdisciplinary, and international labor, sustained by faith, courage, and the will to carry out a truly extraordinary task, no matter the cost.

Since 1985, when the campaign to eradicate the transmission of wild poliovirus in the Americas began, we have overcome great technical, logistical, and financial obstacles. The cost (approximately US\$ 500 million) was largely defrayed by the countries themselves (some \$400 million), in spite of the strictures imposed by the economic crisis. The commitment of the countries prevailed even amid civil conflicts. The following activities bear witness to what can be accomplished despite adverse circumstances: routine vaccination at all health installations; mass vaccination on national vaccination days; large-scale "mop-up" operations to contain possible outbreaks; public information campaigns through all communication media; surveillance conducted through 20 000 local systems; and the formation of a network of improved diagnostic laboratories. These latter two mechanisms have significantly strengthened the infrastructure of the regular health services and will become permanent fixtures.

Apart from the suffering and deaths avoided—the value of which is beyond calculation—the elimination of polio and its associated treatment and rehabilitation costs will save enormous amounts of health service resources each year. Now we are strongly motivated to consolidate this achievement and continue to reach for new goals, such as the eradication of measles and neonatal tetanus. Our experience can also be placed at the service of the rest of the world; we hope that, as with smallpox, polio's eradication here is the prelude to its disappearance from the face of the earth.

History may repeat itself—for good or ill—but it can also be transformed through human diligence and dedication. Accomplishments in the field of health continue to be the best example of that fact.



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