Kick polio out of Africa!

Polio is the number one cause of paralysis in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, practically everyone knows of someone crippled by the disease, but such cases will be increasingly rare by the end of the century if the campaign to "Kick Polio out of Africa" achieves its goal.

Football is being used as the medium for the campaign's message that no one need be a victim of polio: given mass commitment to immunization, the disease could be eradicated from the African continent by the year 2000. Besides underlining the tragedy of polio through the stark contrast between the disability of victims and the super-fitness of sportsmen, "there is no better way than through football of reaching so many people at once," says John Lloyd of WHO's Expanded Programme on Immunization in Geneva. Football matches are played to packed stadiums, and live coverage of games on television and radio regularly attracts audiences of 50 million people across Africa.

The campaign, supported by Rotary International and other partners, was launched at the World Cup qualifying match between Nigeria and Burkina Faso in Ouagadougou on 27 April 1997. At the opening ceremony, 50 children filed on to the pitch and unfurled a huge banner bearing the campaign symbol of a sportsman kicking the virus into oblivion. A ceremonial "Kick Polio" football, first signed by President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, was signed by the President of Burkina Faso in the presence of the team captains, and journalists covering the match received special polio information packs. There were announcements about the eradication campaign over the public address system, and TV and radio spots broadcast regularly during the match reached homes in 31 African countries. The "Kick Polio" football will be signed at every major international match this season by the president of the host country.

Veteran football reporter Apollinaire Gahungu, himself crippled by polio, and Ghanaian-born football star Abedi Ayew Pele have been appointed ambassadors for the campaign launched by WHO to "kick polio out of Africa". Photo WHO/V. Abramov

Veteran football reporter Apollinaire Gahungu, himself crippled by polio, and Ghanaian-born football star Abedi Ayew Pele have been appointed ambassadors for the campaign launched by WHO to "kick polio out of Africa". Their job is to keep polio in the public mind, and to encourage families to have their children immunized against the disease.

The key to eradication is a series of national immunization days that supplement routine immunization activities and focus effort on reaching all children under five years of age with polio vaccine. National immunization days should be held annually and conducted in two rounds several weeks apart. Some countries have been conducting mass immunization days against polio since 1995, but the continent-wide effort to eradicate the disease began in August 1996 when WHO's Regional Director, Dr Ebrahim M. Samba, set up a Polio-Free Africa Committee chaired by President Mandela. Heads of state throughout the continent subsequently pledged support for the campaign at the 1996 Organization of African Unity conference.

So far national immunization days have reached an estimated 73% of children under five in the 41 African countries where polio is endemic, compared with 54% of children routinely vaccinated against polio throughout the region. The goal is to vaccinate 100 million children in the endemic countries, and to declare the continent free of polio by the year 2000. However, the challenges ahead are formidable. Civil war rages in some of the worst polio-affected countries; the cold chain for delivering vaccines is weak in many places because of worn out equipment; surveillance systems for monitoring progress towards eradication urgently need strengthening; and the campaign is short of money, having been pledged only about half the US$52 million budgeted for this year.

Nevertheless, the continent is winning the battle against polio, and President Mandela has called for a redoubling of effort "until we can safely say we have kicked polio out of Africa for ever".

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