

The Challenge of Eradicating Polio from Afghanistan

Mati Ur Rehman

Dear Madam, Polio, a crippling disease that attacks the spinal cord and brain of the infected individual and may result in paralysis remains endemic in Afghanistan. To avoid polio outbreaks, we need mass polio vaccination campaigns that over the years have resulted in a >99% decrease in the total number of cases reported worldwide from an estimated 350,000 in 1988 to 33 reported in 2018.¹ However, Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, like North Waziristan, which borders Afghanistan continue to report positive cases. In 2022, eight new cases were reported in North Waziristan.²

Due to the circumstances surrounding Afghanistan, particularly the political instability, many children younger than five years could not acquire the polio vaccination and this was particularly significant in districts that were already under the influence of the then anti-government forces,³ which now have complete nationwide control.

With their anti-vaccination sentiment, the then antigovernment forces have always spread myths, something that most people in their controlled areas used to trust that vaccines are a conspiracy by the west to sterilize Muslim children.⁴ Now, after their takeover of Kabul, they're ruling the entire country. Therefore, the vaccine refusal rates may go high - resulting in polio outbreaks. The fear of an outbreak has become more critical because of the recent earthquake that has left people to scramble for clean water and food.⁴ because polio spreads via highly contaminated water or food.

For Afghanistan and for the region, if we are to curb the spread of the virus and if we are to eradicate the virus, resumption of a nationwide vaccination programme with a close eye on fake markings because fake markings along

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4th Year MBBS Student, Dow Medical College, Karachi, Pakistan.

Correspondence: Mati Ur Rehman. e-mail: contactmati.afg@gmail.com

ORCID ID. 0000-0001-5572-0345

with refusals to get vaccinated were the two most important reasons of recent outbreaks.²

Moreover, the government in Afghanistan, now in power, must ensure the safety of the polio workers because, in the past, so many vaccinators have been assassinated and kidnapped in order to stop the polio campaign.⁵

Lastly, because of conflicts and myths, eradication of polio remains a challenge in Afghanistan, and the Taliban as a government has a huge responsibility to play. They need to issue fatwas in favor of vaccines and educate people. They must ensure the safety of polio workers and from here to make sure that they reign in horses of their imagination before opening an anti-vaccine front.

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