

Wild Polio Eradicated in Africa Declared By World Health Organization

There is some good news in 2020! The World Health Organization (WHO) announced August 25th that Africa is free from wild polio, which leaves just two countries left where the virus remains endemic - Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This news comes after four years of zero new cases in the certified WHO African Region. This historic milestone now means that over 90% of the world's population is free of the wild poliovirus, moving the world closer to achieving global polio eradication. The Africa Regional Certification Commission (ARCC), an independent organization responsible for overseeing the eradication of wild polio, says that the 47 countries in the WHO's Africa Region were able to achieve this feat after a long process of vaccination and surveillance.

Africa's last case of wild polio was recorded four years ago in northeast Nigeria, where as recently as 2012, had accounted for more than half of the polio cases worldwide. The team working to eradicate polio from Nigeria had several challenges they faced, including the spread of false information and propaganda about the vaccine, as well difficulty tracking nomadic populations that risked spreading the disease during their migrations.

Chima Oluabunwo, an epidemiologist at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia, and also coordinated a project to support wild polio eradication in Nigeria, says that engaging with traditional and religious leaders was crucial in the effort to persuade parents to vaccinate their children.

Even though the fight against wild polio seems to have been won, Africa's battle against the virus isn't quite over. In many countries, vaccination is done with oral drops containing a weakened strain of polio, which can sometimes mutate into a strain that can then spread in under-immunized communities and cause the same effects. Since August 2019, more than 20 countries worldwide have reported cases of vaccine-derived polio. More than 400 cases of vaccine-derived polio have been recorded over the past 12 months alone in Africa. However, Ohuabunwo says, the good news is that because these outbreaks can usually be brought under control with further immunization, countries should continue to vaccinate as many people as possible.

Since 1988, wild polio cases have decreased globally by more than 99%. The battle against vaccine hesitancy and the lack of peace-building, medical services and immunizations in the last two endemic countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan, leaves the world not yet rid of wild polio. Ohuabunwo hopes that the success in Africa will help to support further eradication efforts in the two last countries, because until wild polio is wiped out worldwide, all countries face the possibility of resurgence.

There is no known cure for polio, which can cause irreversible paralysis and can be fatal if breathing muscles are affected, but the vaccination can protect people for life.

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