

After 35 years, polio has been cornered, we must finish the job



Your Turn

Joe Randig and Carol Ferguson
Guest columnists

Since 1988, Rotary and its partners in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative have reduced polio cases by 99.9% worldwide. The wild poliovirus is now circulating only in Afghanistan and Pakistan. That's why we celebrate World Polio Day on Tuesday, Oct. 24th.

The World Health Organization estimates there are more than 15 million polio survivors worldwide, the vast majority of whom are realizing the permanent disability caused by the polio virus. It is estimated that there are 1 million polio survivors in North America.

Throughout our state, we encourage pediatric vaccine acceptance and share factual vaccination information. Together we must continue the march toward global eradication and do our part to prevent polio outbreaks in our own communities. Very few Americans realize that polio paralyzed a 20-year-old man in New York in 2022. Polio was eradicated in the U.S. in 1979, yet as a result of lack of vaccination, we have been added to this list of outbreak countries, along with Canada, Israel and the United Kingdom.

One lesson learned during the polio epidemics is that there are hundreds of asymptomatic poliovirus infections for each paralytic case, meaning that many of those infected with polio were so mildly affected that they didn't know they'd had the virus. Just because someone had no or minor flu-like symptoms, showing no obvious weakness or paralysis, doesn't mean that the poliovirus didn't do damage to neurons in the brain and spinal cord.

The safety and efficacy of the inactivated Salk polio vaccine is well documented. It is the only vaccine given in the U.S. since 2000. As evidence in our neighboring state of New York, for those who have not been vaccinated, the time for action is now.

We have an opportunity to make history by ending polio, making it the second disease in history to be eradicated through the use of vaccination. For us it's deeply personal because we're polio survivors and we understand that it will never be over. Survivors of this disease, all over the U.S. and abroad will always remember:

- The terror, sadness and loneliness that came with being so sick.
- Lonely months and years of hospitalization, surgeries and painful rehabilitation all while separated from parents and siblings.

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- The frightening reality of an iron lung and the lack of human touch.
- The sorrow that came with discovering wheelchairs, leg braces and crutches were ours for life.
- The loneliness that came as we returned home, and were forced to accept that everyone around us knew that it was the home of a "cripple," and parents kept their children away.
- It will never be over, as we realize the shock that has come with the reality of the late effects of polio, when those of us who thought we escaped or recovered from paralysis find ourselves with new weakness, fatigue and pain as we age.

We are asking everyone to help us finish the job and end polio for good, so that this paralyzing disease does not return to polio-free countries, putting children everywhere at risk.

Get involved. Vaccination for smallpox is no longer necessary. It was eradicated in 1980. Thanks to the passion and raw determination of Rotarians and their partners in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), polio will be the second disease in history to have that marvelous distinction. This enormous effort is the basis for our dedication to support that initiative. Donations can be made directly to the Rotary Foundation. For every dollar you donate, the Gates Foundation will turn it into three.

Our PA Polio Network was founded in 2014 by a polio survivor who was searching for current and accurate information on post-polio syndrome. We have attracted a dedicated group of thoughtful professional contributors and volunteers who provide guidance and help with maintaining our extensive website. We are survivors who bring forth information about managing the lifelong, disabling effects of the poliovirus. We are in service to bring support and information to polio survivors, families, caregivers and health care providers.

Please join us and become a part of the solution. If polio exists anywhere, it is a threat to children everywhere.

Joe Randig, of Allegheny County, is the western Pennsylvania coordinator of the PA Polio Survivors Network. Carol Ferguson, of Bucks County, is a Rotarian and founder of the PA Polio Survivors Network, polionetwork.org.