

DA Henderson, on the launch of PAHO's campaign to eradicate polio in the Americas by 1990  
PAHO, Washington DC

Announcement of Regional Polio Eradication

May 14, 1985

The Regional Director has given me the felicitous responsibility of extending to all of you a warm welcome on the occasion of his historic announcement regarding poliomyelitis. This, I should like to point out, is an especially notable day, for on May 14, 189 years ago, in a small village in the west of England, Dr. Edward Jenner vaccinated Sarah Welms with cowpox virus - the historic first vaccination to be performed. I am Dr. D.A. Henderson, formerly a staff member of the World Health Organization where I served as Director of the Smallpox Eradication Program - and, since the conclusion of that initiative, as Dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health. With us today are many distinguished persons from the field of public health and medicine, from the international agencies, and representatives of government and the private sector - including many who through their work, permitted this dream to be visualized. It is impossible to introduce all, but I should like to introduce some. Joining me at the rostrum are the Honorable Edward Kennedy, Senator of the United States; Dr. James Grant, Director General of UNICEF; the Director of the Pan American Health Organization, Dr. Carlyle Macedo; Dr. Carlos Conesco, President of Rotary International; Mr. Michael Curtin, Vice President of the Inter-American Development Bank; and Dr. William Foege, Chairman of the Bellagio Committee for the Protection of the World's Children - a committee serving to coordinate efforts of the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program and other interested organizations, both public and private. Also present with us are the Minister of Health of Antigua and Barbuda, the Honorable Christopher Ouard; the Minister of Health of Colombia, Dr. Rafael Zubirira; the Minister of Health of the Dominican Republic, Dr. Perez Mera; the Minister of Health of El Salvador, Dr. Benjamin Valdez; the Vice Minister of Health of Mexico, Dr. Jesus Kumate; the Assistant Secretary of Health of the United States, Dr. James Mason. Representing the Director-General of the World Health Organization is Dr. Ralph Henderson, the Director of

the Expanded Program on Immunization. Special guests, who as scientists made possible the control and eventual eradication of poliomyelitis, are also here: Nobel Laureates Drs. Fred Robbins and Thomas Weller; Dr. Albert Sabin; Dr. Jonas Salk; and Dr. Alex Langmuir. Also present are ambassadors and representatives of all the principal countries of the region, as well as representatives of many international institutions.

The possibility of eradication of various diseases on a continental, hemisphere-wide or global basis has long been a dream of public health scientists and governments alike. Although enthusiastically embraced during the 1950s, repeated disappointments eventually led many to believe that, at least in this century, eradication of any disease was perhaps a utopian goal. However, the successful global program of smallpox eradication rekindled an interest in the concept of eradication. When the smallpox program was launched by the World Health Assembly in 1966, skeptics abounded - those with confidence that it could or would succeed were few indeed. Not appreciated by any at that time was the remarkable potential for achievement when national political commitment was fully supported by international and bilateral agencies, when - through an international organization - these many efforts could be coordinated and when that stimulus translated into effective action by individuals and organizations, both public and private, throughout the world.

The program revealed in every country immense, previously unappreciated resources of action and energy. From that program arose the Expanded Program on Immunization, a program whose objective is to provide to children throughout the world six important vaccines. Although this, too, was regarded as utopian in scope and concept, remarkable progress has been made - the most striking achievements being recorded here in the Region of the Americas. The number of cases of each of these diseases have declined sharply over the past five years - and poliomyelitis most dramatically.

Poliomyelitis, as you know, has long been one of the most feared of the infectious diseases leaving in the wake of each epidemic, large numbers of permanently crippled children and adults. Before a vaccine became available, the USA alone recorded upwards of 15,000 paralytic cases per year. In the other countries of the Americas, the numbers were at least as great. With the availability of polio vaccine, naturally occurring poliomyelitis steadily decreased and then in the early 1970s, vanished from North America. Until recently, however, progress in vaccination programs in the other countries of the Americas was less satisfactory - annually, some 3,000 to 5,000 cases were reported, a figure which because of underreporting probably represented not more than one-tenth the actual number. However, this picture has begun to change dramatically as country after country has intensified its efforts. Last year, despite greatly improved reporting, less than 500 cases were recorded in the whole of the Western Hemisphere.

But can we actually interrupt transmission of the wild virus throughout this hemisphere? The disease in its epidemiological behavior differs greatly from smallpox; natural infection without paralysis is common; and full protection from the disease requires administration of vaccine on not one but several occasions. An ad hoc Advisory Committee convened by Dr. Macedo considered carefully these and many other questions and finally reached the conclusion that eradication was a feasible objective. It was recognized that the task would not be an easy one, that the full commitment of national governments and international agencies alike would be required. Given such a commitment, however, it was the belief of the Committee that the task could be accomplished while, in the process, strengthening and developing health activities of many types.

Undoubtedly, some today are skeptical - and constructive skepticism is to be welcomed. The eradication of poliomyelitis from this hemisphere would present a bold challenge to nations throughout the hemisphere and to others throughout the world - a challenge which inevitably must be a constructive one for children at risk throughout the world.

It is now a great pleasure to introduce to you Dr. Carlyle Macedo, Regional Director of the Pan American Health Organization, whose vision it was to examine the feasibility of a bold initiative such as this.

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ANNOUNCEMENT BY DR. CARLYLE GUERRA DE MACEDO, DIRECTOR,  
PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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I am pleased to welcome so many distinguished scientific, political, and diplomatic leaders this morning to the Pan American Health Organization. Your presence here at PAHO demonstrates once more the combined commitment of the countries of the hemisphere to the struggle against disease in the Americas.

As the Regional Office of the World Health Organization in this hemisphere, PAHO has a permanent task of working with its member countries in pursuit of Health For All by the Year 2000. That responsibility is even greater when it touches our children.

Throughout the world, some 5 million children under five years of age die each year from diseases which we can prevent with medicines and relatively common technology available to us today. They die mainly of poor perinatal care, of hunger or of some infection. In the countries of the Americas, 800,000 children die each year from preventable diseases, as many children as the number of people who live in this city. It is as if an entire city the size of Washington, its inhabitants only children, were to be destroyed every year.

The tragedy is that those lives are lost not because we do not know how to prevent or control those diseases, but because we have failed to assure all children access to the benefits of the knowledge we possess.

Perhaps the most effective and efficient of all the health technologies known to man is immunization. The geniuses of science, and many are here today, have developed effective vaccines which protect against most of the childhood infectious diseases. Yet, 80 per cent of the world's children do not receive that protection. Even here in the Americas, 4 million children born every year do not yet have access to vaccination against those childhood killer diseases.

Around the world, every six seconds, one child dies and another is disabled because of the failure to immunize against those diseases. ....In that space of time, a child has died because of the lack of immunization.

A decade ago, the World Health Organization sought to counter this threat to the children of the world by establishing the Expanded Program on Immunization. In 1977, it was begun here at PAHO with the aim of preventing six diseases--measles, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, tuberculosis and poliomyelitis.

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We created a revolving fund, financed by special contributions of several donor countries. Last year, PAHO received a special grant from the U.S. to complete that fund. PAHO now can purchase vaccines for the participating countries at the lowest possible cost. Reducing the cost means reaching more children.

Much has been achieved since 1977. A vast number of health workers have been trained. Cold chain systems that keep the vaccines viable have been organized and are being maintained in country after country. Immunization is one of the top priorities in the national health plans of every country of this region.

In 1977, immunization reached between 25-30% of the children. By 1984, we saw the countries double that coverage, extending that fundamental life-saving technology to 60 per cent of the children at risk. The gap is still enormous: too many children still suffer needless illnesses and too many still die.

The most dramatic advances have been made with polio immunization where we have boosted coverage nearly three-fold to 75% of those under one year of age since 1977. But the disease has not been conquered: by 1990, if nothing new is

done and if the number of new victims reported in 1984 is repeated year by year, there will be at least 2,500 more children paralyzed, crippled or dead because of this acute viral disease.

We must put an end, once and for all, to that spectre of crippling disease which still looms before the children of the Americas. Without the eradication of the polio virus, the chances of a sudden outbreak of polio still exists. Eradicating the virus from this hemisphere is the only sure way to protect our children from the threat of that disease.

We have the means available to accomplish that goal, thanks to many of the men who are with us today. These remarkable scientists have given us the tools to put an end to the sight of children in wheel chairs or hospital beds because of polio. Drs. Frederick Robbins, and Thomas Weller, along with Dr. John Enders, received the Nobel Prize for their pioneering work with tissue culture which made a vaccine possible.

The final developers of the vaccines also are with us today, and their great contribution to the well-being of children has made their names household words--Dr. Jonas Salk and Dr. Albert Sabin.

They have made it possible. But there are others who have helped to make it feasible. The many multilateral, bilateral and nongovernmental agencies--most of which are represented here today--helped create the necessary network of external support for the countries of the world.

UNICEF, through its strong advocacy of child survival, has raised international awareness, motivated governments and provided important resources for immunization. UNICEF and PAHO have developed an unprecedented and extraordinary cooperative relationship. Throughout the Americas, we are working side by side sharing goals, projects and resources.

UNDP and UNFPA have promoted vaccine quality programs and strengthened maternal and child health services.

The Inter-American Development and the World Bank have emphasized immunization in financing development and health projects in the Americas.

USAID and other bilateral cooperation agencies, have given substantial priority to programs in child health, especially immunization and oral rehydration.

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Rotary International is a stellar example of the spirit of voluntary action by citizens around the world. It has dedicated itself to make the elimination of polio its highest priority.

Some of these organizations are part of the Group which met under international auspices at Bellagio to commit themselves to protect the world's children through immunization.

The work of the individuals whom I have cited, the collaborative actions of the various agencies I have mentioned and above all, the progress of the countries themselves, have convinced us that it is feasible today to interrupt the transmission of wild polio virus in the hemisphere by 1990. We are convinced that it is possible to reduce the number of cases from 500 annually to zero.

We are proposing that the member countries of PAHO be supported by all of us to achieve the eradication of polio from the Americas in a massive final five year effort. The time has come for us to say that it is unacceptable for any child in the Americas to suffer from polio.

We saw nearly 200 years elapse between Jenner's vaccination experiments and the elimination of smallpox from the Americas and the world. The genius of man has made it possible for us to consider a time much shorter between the first vaccinations for polio and its elimination from our hemisphere. The Americas was the first Region to eliminate smallpox; we can be the first to eliminate polio.

It will not be an easy task, but we are convinced that our plan of action can work. It will focus on the acceleration of the Expanded Program of Immunization with special vaccination strategies in each country, supported by effective disease surveillance and control and training of health workers. It will strengthen the countries' maternal and child health services which are so vital for the health of our children.

We will be tapping the voluntary organizations in every country, inviting the participation of the mass media and mobilizing individual families and communities. We will promote a nationwide effort in every country, dedicated to a common strategy, committed to a common goal.

The drive to eliminate polio will be the vehicle that will carry the nations of the hemisphere toward the EPI goals of universal immunization against the childhood diseases by 1990.

We estimate that the cost of halting the transmission of wild poliovirus from the Americas will be approximately \$100 million over the next five years. We believe that we will obtain one-third of that amount from donor countries and institutions and part of that amount already is included in their current and future budget plans. The remainder will come from the countries themselves, in spite of the financial crisis which currently pervades this Region. For most of them, it will mean the reprogramming and more efficient utilization of resources which are already being spent in health.

I am convinced that this commitment by the nations of the Americas to eradicate polio will not fail because of the lack of financial resources. The long-term economic return will far outweigh the actual costs of the effort, although my personal conviction is that it is time to stop using economic indicators alone to measure the development and well being of children.

Although individual countries have shown that it can be done, sceptics will say this is too ambitious an undertaking.

I say it is the least that we can do. For I dream of a time when we have not only rid this hemisphere of the curse of polio, but of a time when, for every child, the future is, as the poet wrote, "a world to be born under your footsteps." We can build a better world for our children. We can make a revolution in health. We need only to decide to work together to do it.

Let us now take this first step toward that future by eradicating polio from the Americas by 1990: I trust that we or others like us will meet here at that time to rejoice in our having achieved the goal we have set today.

Once more, in this special struggle to eradicate polio, health must and will be a bridge for solidarity and understanding between the peoples and countries of the Americas, a bridge for peace and well-being.