

WORKING TOGETHER TO END POLIO

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Last Christmas was the first time I said “polio” in front of our family friend, Raquel. Normally, I talk about my work in polio eradication until I am blue in the face. But Raquel is different. She is one of my mother’s oldest and dearest friends, and she was paralyzed by polio as an infant.

Raquel’s parents were determined to provide her an education and to encourage her through all of life’s adventures. I have known her my entire life but we had never spoken about her paralysis until this particular day. We spoke at length about her successes and challenges, and the potential legacy of polio eradication.

Three regions of the world are free of acute poliomyelitis: the Americas, the Western Pacific, and Europe. Polio is still endemic in seven countries (2002) and, of these, 99 percent of the cases are confined to India, Pakistan, and Nigeria.

In some countries like Angola, just ending a civil conflict can provide access to children who have never been vaccinated. It is a golden opportunity to talk to parents and communities about the importance of *all* vaccines.

By working at the community level, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as CARE, contribute to the polio campaign from the bottom up. We motivate local leaders and train traditional healers and birth attendants to be our eyes and ears in the communities. Community surveillance not only helps the global effort to find and test every suspected case of polio, but also gives community volunteers a sense that they can make their families’ lives better despite the poverty in which they live.

Combating “volunteer fatigue” is one of the challenges of the eradication effort. In India, many people have been polio volunteers for years and still do not see the disease eradicated from their country.

Training volunteers to communicate effectively against rumors is another challenge. Fear of sterility, AIDS, and other diseases are just some of the reasons parents and grandparents do not allow children to be vaccinated.

We aim to eradicate polio this decade. Part of polio’s legacy will be a stronger global laboratory infrastructure, which will have the capacity to tackle other diseases.

When I next see Raquel, I will tell her about the conversations I have had with mothers in the developing world about vaccinating their children and the importance of taking their paralyzed children to rehabilitation centers.

Raquel’s strength keeps me motivated. I someday hope to tell her that polio has been eradicated — that no other child will be paralyzed by polio. ●

The Last Child: The Global Race to End Polio, an upcoming documentary, tells the behind-the-scenes story of the global campaign to eradicate polio. To learn more about the documentary and the polio eradication effort, visit www.lastchild.org.

