

## World Polio Day at Utah Valley University

The Utah Valley University (UVU) Office for Global Engagement held a virtual event commemorating World Polio Day on 19 October 2020. My original plan for involvement included researching speakers, their accomplishments and involvement with UVU Rotaract, which is student club of Rotary International and its mission to eradicate polio, and in the introduction of speakers. Sadly, due to the coronavirus pandemic and safety precautions I was not able to attend event in person. Still, I learned some new insights about polio, and the Rotary International's efforts to eradicate polio as a global disease, which have been profound and inspiring.



### *Dr. Scott Leckman speaks via ZOOM*

Dr. Scott Leckman was the main presenter. He shared his experiences and involvement with Rotary International. He cited the organization's mission, saying, "The eradication of polio is our number one priority."

The first reported case of polio was in the United States in 1916. At its initial breakout, about 9,000 people died, and at least 27,000 more were paralyzed. It would be another 35 years

before the development of a vaccine. In 1951, Dr. Jonas Salk discovered that there were three distinct types of polio viruses, and developed the first vaccine against polio; an injection of a 'killed,' or inactive, sample of the virus. Later, in 1961, Dr. Albert Sabin developed an oral vaccine, which consisted of a 'live,' or active, sample of the virus. There is currently no cure for polio. However, vaccines are available, and when administered to young children, can immunize them from polio.

In 1979, the government of Philippines partnered with Rotary International for the immunization of over six million Filipino children. This was the first ever 3-H Grant (Health, Hunger, and Humanity) by Rotary International. The 3-H grant would eventually become PolioPlus. In 1985, Rotary International set a goal to eradicate polio. At that time, there were thousands of cases of polio paralysis in children, in at least 125 countries. In 2020, due in large part to the efforts of Rotary International and its partners, polio has been eradicated in all but two countries. This is also related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goal 3: Good health and wellbeing.

Dr. Leckman cited some of the challenges to the eradication of polio. For one, polio can be difficult to detect without tests. He compared polio with smallpox, the only known disease to have been eradicated. A person with smallpox would be easily identified, as smallpox has an apparent outward presence. With polio, only 1 in every 200 people, or 0.5% of people with polio are paralyzed. The other 99.5% of people are asymptomatic (a parallel, he pointed out, to the current coronavirus).

Another challenge to the eradication of polio is the cost. Although there are only 2 countries left with active polio cases, the total cost to eliminate the virus is an estimated \$1.2 billion. Rotary International has committed to raising \$50 million over the next three years in order to meet this goal. In 2017, Bill Gates, a Rotary International partner, pledged that his foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, would match every \$1 raised by Rotary International by donating \$2, up to \$450 million.

Despite the challenges to wiping out polio, many are still optimistic that it can happen, and that it should happen. Dr. Leckman gave five reasons to eradicate polio.

The first reason for ridding the world of polio is the lives that would be saved. It is true, the amount of work and costs of eradicating polio are high. However, the costs are minimal compared to the lives that can and will be saved, and/or cured. If the goal for polio was to control

it rather than to eradicate it, over 10 million children would suffer paralysis from polio over the next four decades.

The second reason for the eradication of polio is the simple fact that we have the tools to end the disease, in an unprecedented way. Laboratories, millions of volunteers, the vaccine – all of these tools are available. The last of these tools would be funding, a goal that Rotarians around the world work towards the goal of \$50 million over the next three years. Choosing not to eradicate polio would be careless because at this point, it is preventable.

The third argument is economic; purging the world of polio now is a long-term investment that will yield more than one hundred times the current cost of vaccinating children. As an example, the United States budget for polio vaccinations in 2020 was set at \$237 million. If the United States invested \$9 billion in polio-eradication efforts, economic benefits over the next two decades would come out to \$40-\$50 billion in economic returns, as the money spent on polio vaccinations can be assigned to other policy areas.

Fourth, Rotary International's efforts to purge the world of polio have contributed to strengthening internal health organizations in different countries around the world. Rotary International's efforts have effectively established an active disease surveillance network in the countries they have worked in. This network supports other health interventions including measles vaccinations and other diseases. The network also helps with distributing medicines.

Finally, the success of the fight against polio may prove to be a critical stepping stone to more like successes in the future. The ability to reach all children with the polio vaccine is proof that, now, more than ever before, we have the tools and resources to successfully treat a life-threatening disease. As the world faces new threats (and one currently, the coronavirus), having conquered polio may be the success that will spur on the world to work together to overcome the next global health project.

The most important subject that Dr. Leckman touched on was answering the question, "What now?" After being informed on polio, the work of Rotary International and its partners, what can interested individuals do? The answer: advocacy and community awareness. Many people may not know anything about polio, or much, if they do. However, we can raise awareness by having conversations in our communities, with others we encounter in our day.

Dean Robinson, Rotary member since 1988 and current president of the Orem Rotary also spoke at the Rotaract event. He spoke on the background of Rotary International, crediting an

important part of its success to the fact that it is an independent service organization that is neither political nor religious. This has allowed Rotary International access to countries that would may be closed to different government or religious organizations.



*Dr. Robinson speaks during the event.*

In the state of Utah, the Rotary Clubs across the state provided over 34,000 hours of service, from over 700 volunteers, and raised just over \$1.7 million.

President Robinson also spoke of the United Nations and Rotary International's long and cooperative history. At the United Nation's first summit in 1946, Rotarians attended as part of the General Assembly. The United Nations celebrates Rotary Day, a commemoration of the collaboration and between the two organizations.

President Robinson commended the Rotaract Club at UVU, lauding their efforts to be involved in doing good and balancing that with their lives and schooling timeframe.

*Patricia Mo'unga, UVU student*