



Afghanistan first to use new polio vaccine

By Dan Nixon

Rotary International News -- 14 January 2010



A health worker administers the new bivalent oral polio vaccine to a child in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. *Photo courtesy of UNICEF*

A new oral polio vaccine, developed to stop the transmission of the type 1 and type 3 wild polioviruses simultaneously, made its world debut during 15-17 December Subnational Immunization Days in Afghanistan.

An estimated 2.8 million children received the vaccine during the campaign, which was funded by the Canadian government.

According to the [World Health Organization](#), the bivalent vaccine is also intended for introduction in India and Nigeria by late January and is expected to be a critical new tool in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

Of the three wild polioviruses, known as types 1, 2, and 3, type 2 hasn't been seen anywhere in the world since 1999. This achievement led to the development of monovalent vaccines, which provide more effective protection against a single type than the traditional trivalent vaccine. In a clinical field trial completed in June, the newly developed bivalent vaccine proved to be at least 30 percent more effective than the trivalent vaccine and almost as good as the monovalent vaccines.

As of 22 December, Afghanistan reported 31 polio cases in 2009, 28 of which occurred in the southern region. Families there are frequently on the move because of the changing security situation, limiting health workers' access to children. The bivalent vaccine simplifies the logistics of optimally protecting each child.



“The new vaccine will allow us to save time and energy and reach, eventually, many more children,” said Sheila Noor, one of 21,000 health workers deployed by the Afghan Ministry of Health. “We explain to every mother that this time a new vaccine is used that will protect their children even better. They appreciate it.”

One reason health workers encountered little resistance during the immunization campaign was the effectiveness of social mobilizers. Before the effort began, volunteers trained by WHO, UNICEF, and the health ministry visited homes and explained the importance of vaccination.

Another reason was the agreement of Taliban leaders to allow immunization in the areas they control. Health workers who went house to house to vaccinate children carried letters from these leaders endorsing the campaign.

The ongoing effort to end polio in the country is staunchly supported by Rotary’s Afghanistan PolioPlus Committee, chaired by Ajmal Pardis, a member of the Rotary Club of Jalalabad.

“Eighty-four percent of Afghans live in parts that are polio-free, and they are not being reinfected despite the vast movement [of people] we have in this country,” said WHO spokesperson Peter Graaff. “We are doing quite well, even in areas that are either disputed or under control of insurgents.”

