

The Philippines is polio-free, but the threat still exists

Manila Bulletin · 20 Nov 2018 · C1 · EDUARDO GONZALES, MD

Polio has been eliminated in almost all countries but it has not been eradicated yet. Eradication happens when there is zero incidence of infection worldwide. Until that time, there will always be a risk of re-emergence of the wild polio virus and vaccine-derived polio virus in countries, which have already eliminated the disease, the Philippines included.

acute illness will have residual paralysis, usually of one lower extremity, and become permanently handicapped.

Given that a person with poliomyelitis can transmit the poliovirus for up to several weeks and that the virus is highly communicable, it is easy to understand that in an unvaccinated population practically everyone will ultimately get infected with the virus. Even if only one in a thousand will acquire the paralytic form of the disease, the actual number of people who are bound to die or become permanently disabled in a country with a population of more than 100 million such as the Philippines is staggering.

Thus the least that Filipino parents could do to contribute to the efforts to permanently rid the country and the world of polio is to ensure that their children get immunized with the polio vaccine.

Email inquiries on health matters to: medical_notes@yna-hoc.com.



Isn't it true the Philippines is a polio-free country? How come we still routinely immunize our children with the polio vaccine? — lovie__plice@gmail.com

You're right, the Philippines was certified to be polio-free by the World Health Organization (WHO) in October 2000. The concerted worldwide action aimed at eradicating polio (short for poliomyelitis) started in 1988 when the World Health Assembly targeted global eradication of polio by the year 2000 via mass immunization with the oral poliovaccine (OPV).

As a result of the WHO global campaign, polio has become uncommon, so uncommon that in 2018 only a total of 17 cases of the disease have been reported worldwide, with these cases occurring in just two countries: Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Despite the seemingly insignificant number of cases of the disease, the threat of re-emergence of polio in those countries that have eliminated it still

exist, that is why we still continue to routinely immunize all our children with the polio vaccine.

Why the polio threat persists

Polio has been eliminated in almost all countries but it has not been eradicated yet. Eradication happens when there is zero incidence of infection worldwide. And until that time, there will always be a risk of re-emergence of the wild polio virus and vaccine-derived polio virus in countries which have already eliminated the disease, the Philippines included.

Vaccine-derived polio virus refers to the polio virus in the oral polio vaccine, a live but weakened virus that has mutated but remained capable of producing the disease. Several countries have reported instances of vaccine-derived polio. In fact, here in the Philippines, we had three such cases in 2001. To reduce the threat from vaccine-derived polio, the oral polio vaccine is gradually being replaced by an injectable vaccine, which uses dead viruses.

What polio is all about

Polio is a viral infection with any of the three serotypes (1, 2, and 3) of the polio virus. The virus is usually acquired through the fecal-oral route. In more than 99 percent of cases, polio is a very mild, self-limiting disease. In fact, more than 95 percent of persons who acquire the infection will not even have any sign or symptom. Only five percent become ill and most of them will manifest the mild form of the disease that is characterized by fever, sore throat, headache, vomiting, and either diarrhea or constipation. In addition, some patients may show signs of nervous system irritation and muscle spasms. As a rule, persons who get afflicted with the mild form of polio recover completely.

But in one of every thousand polio cases, a dreadful form of the disease develops. This form of the illness is called paralytic poliomyelitis. It is characterized by muscle paralysis that occurs at anytime while the patient has fever. A good number of persons who develop paralytic poliomyelitis die either because of paralysis of the muscles of respiration or because of complications like pneumonia, heart problems, urinary infection, etc. A large number of those who recover from the acute illness will have residual paralysis, usually of one lower extremity, and become permanently handicapped.

Given that a person with poliomyelitis can transmit the poliovirus for up to several weeks and that the virus is highly communicable, it is easy to understand that in an unvaccinated population practically everyone will ultimately get infected with the virus. Even if only one in a thousand will acquire the paralytic form of the disease,

the actual number of people who are bound to die or become permanently disabled in a country with of population of more than 100 million such as the Philippines is staggering.

Thus the least that Filipino parents could do to contribute to the efforts to permanently rid the country and the world of polio is to ensure that their children get immunized with the polio vaccine.