

### **Editorial: The Plight of Pakistani Polio Workers**

Polio is an infectious disease caused by a virus. The illness, which spreads from person to person, usually affects unimmunized children under five years of age. Initially the affected child develops symptoms of fever, weakness and diarrhea. In a subset of children, the illness can cause permanent paralysis and may even prove fatal.

In the past, polio disease used to affect a huge number of children around the world. Thanks to a robust global response against the illness, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, this number decreased drastically. For comparison, in 1988 there were 350,000 cases of polio which dropped to just 33 in 2018. That is a reduction of 99 percent. The availability of an effective vaccine has helped eradicate polio from most countries in the world. Unfortunately, two countries have still not prevailed in this fight. Polio continues to be endemic in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Several factors are responsible for Pakistan's failure to eradicate the virus. They include poverty, lack of awareness, corruption, and a worsening security situation. The situation has turned from bad to worse with a new problem rearing its ugly head: attacks on polio workers. Even though resistance to vaccines has been an established phenomenon, attacks targeting polio workers have mainly taken place during the last decade or so. In December 2012, 9 polio campaign workers were shot dead, marking the start of a tragic onslaught on the front-line staff which has continued to this date and so far at least 70 health workers have been killed in connection with polio campaigns.

This is a worrisome trend, to say the least. On the one hand, our country is losing its fight against polio which has been eradicated from most of the countries already. On the other hand, the front-line workers are in jeopardy and have to work under extremely perilous conditions. Understanding the reason behind attacks on polio vaccination staff is necessary not only to ensure the safety of these workers but also to successfully implement the end game strategy against the virus.

### **Misinformation Reigns**

In order to better understand the impact of misinformation, one has to look no further from the current pandemic. Covid-19 was initially

dubbed a conspiracy and its vaccine has been associated with a plethora of nonsensical conspiracies. As may be expected, this has hampered the fight against the virus. The story of polio disease is not much different when it comes to misinformation.

In a country like Pakistan, where the literacy rate is very low, people often have difficulty accessing information from authentic sources. Many myths and falsehoods about polio have found their way with the masses. A number of people are still not convinced that polio is an actual disease. Many think that polio vaccines are a ploy. They wrongly believe that these vaccines are actually drugs meant to cause infertility. They thus deem vaccines as dangerous. The recent assassination of Osama Bin Laden which was purportedly carried out under a fake immunization campaign has lent further credence to such myths. The result is that most people feel reluctant in allowing their children to be vaccinated.

Some clerics have done considerable damage to the public trust in this regard. They have openly called the vaccines harmful and have advised against their use. Such hostile views on vaccines are likely to draw the ire of people against health workers who have to go from door to door to offer the vaccines. Misinformation plays a pivotal role in creating an atmosphere of hostility toward vaccination programs.

### **Misguided Views**

Refusal to treatment on religious grounds is an established phenomenon in medicine. However, when it comes to polio vaccination, the stance of religion must be elucidated before passing a judgment. Islam, the mainstream religion in Pakistan, encourages treatment and prevention of any disease. Polio vaccination thus is fully in consonance with the injunctions of Islam. Unfortunately, many people, including some clerics, wrongly reject vaccination on religious grounds. Once again, such misguided views feed into the belief that vaccines and those who offer them are doing something wrong.

### **Socioeconomic and political instability**

Pakistan has struggled with economic and security issues throughout its checkered history. The northwestern regions, where most attacks on polio workers have taken place, have been particularly hit by conflicts in the last

two decades. The country is faced with many economic challenges with inflation skyrocketing, joblessness at an all-time high, and the general outlook dismal. As if this were not enough, the pandemic has taken its own toll on the country. All these factors together make it even more difficult to provide a secure environment for any project including health-related initiatives.

### **What is the way forward?**

As we have seen, the issue of polio immunization and the safety of polio workers is a multifactorial phenomenon and tackling it would require a multipronged strategy. Overcoming the barriers to polio vaccination is necessary both to win the fight against the disease and create a safe environment for health workers. Government and non-government sectors will need to join forces in order to achieve the common goal of polio eradication.

### **Raising Awareness**

The starting point has to be fighting misinformation. Misinformation and lack of awareness are related concepts. The first step is to increase awareness about polio disease and its immunization. In order to debunk prevalent myths, remove common misconceptions and create an atmosphere of trust, it is crucial to launch active awareness campaigns. The government must take it upon itself to do the necessary task of public education.

Explaining the illness and the need for immunization to the people, especially parents is essential. Parental attitude is known to affect whether a child is allowed to be immunized. The internet has a huge potential in this regard. Social media platforms can be a very cost-effective method of launching awareness campaigns. Other forms of media can also be utilized for maximum effect.

Engaging religious and other community leaders is equally important. Taking clerics on board can go a long way in building public trust in vaccination. Religious scholars can be instrumental in highlighting the importance of vaccination and the need to respect the life and wellbeing of every person including the health workers.

### **Economic and Political Stability**

As mentioned previously, the success of any project depends, among other things, on economic and political stability. In order to successfully implement vaccination programs, it is necessary that peace and stability is restored in the region.

### **Extremist Views**

The scourge of militancy has damaged Pakistan in more ways than one. In fact, militancy poses an existential threat to the nation. Unfortunately, in the past militants have been able to play upon the religious sentiment of the masses. This has often led to misguided views which are not rooted in religion. The view that vaccination is against any religious ideology is misguided and must be discarded.

In passing, I must mention that in the current edition of this journal you will find several studies pertaining to the subject of militancy. In addition, you will find several other interesting and informative articles which you are welcome to read.

Abdul Majid Khan (PhD Scotland),  
Guest Editor,  
University of Swabi, KP, Pakistan.