

POLIO, the other deadly virus.

Over the past six months the polio virus and its deadly grip on the lives of children, zero to five years old, in Pakistan and Afghanistan, has been pushed to the side by the new Covid-19 virus. The amazing progress we had been able to make in bringing Polio to its knees reached a tantalizingly low point towards the end of three successive years, 2016, 2017 and 2018. We ended those years with a grand total of 37, 22 and 33 new wild polio virus cases respectively, which denoted a tremendously tight and consistent grasp on the control factors, both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The porous border between these two neighbouring countries notwithstanding, there was no change in the processes each country had put in place for those years.

2019 turned out to be a year of severe reversals for Pakistan, where new cases of the wild polio virus shot up steeply from 12 to 147! Why did this happen? The October 2019 International Monitoring Board for Polio meeting raised as many as four issues — dysfunctional team, politicisation of the programme, community mistrust and programme performance. The large resurgence observed starting from late 2018 highlighted the fragility of the gains observed in the preceding three years in the absence of optimal essential immunisation coverage. The high number of cases in south Khyber Pakhtoon and interior Sindh, which were transiently polio-free areas, suggested that their response to the changing epidemiological environment was suboptimal.

This situation was vastly different from the one in 2018 when our Polio Immunization team of six from Canada spent six days in Karachi and Lahore. The excellent training session of the door to door polio case workers, all recruited from within the community they were to serve to instantly remove any veneer of mistrust that may have existed with outside help; the meticulous monitoring at the border gates, where on any given day as many as 1600 public transport vehicles and trucks and passenger vehicles entering and exiting the country were stopped and checked for children zero to five years and the ones without the purple mark were immunized and purple dabbed. With such solid improvements in place, we were not at all surprised with 12 cases for 2018.

Based on the IMB findings and recommendations in 2019, the Polio committee once again redefined their priorities and assembled themselves defining 2020 as the year of transformation and 2021 as the year to stop transmission. However, with 58 new wild polio virus cases as of the middle of July this year, Pakistan informed the IMB that the Covid-19 pandemic had

also been a reason for a surge in polio cases in the country as it had hampered routine immunisation and campaigns against the crippling disease.

Afghanistan, amazingly, has managed to keep its annual polio new case count below 30 for the past five years. This consistent performance has been in the face of US air raids targeting Taliban hideouts and Taliban attacks on Afghan security forces and polio volunteers as well as civilian sites such as mosques. Afghanistan is currently struggling to contain the Covid-19 virus with hundreds of thousands of their citizens returning from Iran after the factories there had closed, some of them likely bringing home the virus.

According to an official of the Pakistan National Institute of Health, a 42-month-old male child, resident of South Waziristan district, has become the latest victim of the crippling disease. He said all four limbs of the child, who did not receive even a single dose of the vaccine, had been paralysed.

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