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Polio outbreak stopped in the Middle East, efforts are still needed

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Despite continuing conflict, declining immunization rates in conflict affected areas and mass population displacement, no new polio cases have been reported in the Middle East for over 18 months, and experts believe the extensive multi-country outbreak response has been effective in stopping the outbreak.

The outbreak, which was detected when a case of polio was confirmed in northern Syria, paralyzed 36 children in Syria and two in Iraq between October 2013 and April 2014, prompting fears of a major epidemic. In what has become the largest ever immunization response in the history of the Middle East, more than 70 mass immunization campaigns were implemented in 8 countries, aimed at reaching 27 million children with vaccine multiple times, and more than 200 million doses of vaccine were given.

The response in the Middle East is one of the most well-coordinated and intensely focused outbreak response efforts we've seen in the history of eradication programmes.

The swift and collaborative intervention and effective partnerships between the governments of countries dealing with the outbreak, World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, other GPEI partners, international organizations and NGOs has been given credit for the successes of the response and the lessons learned have been shared globally.

Next steps to maintain the gains should be taken. Experts strongly encouraged governments to continue working with partners to strengthen the basic delivery of routine immunization and focus on further strengthening surveillance so that the virus will be detected should it reappear.

Despite the positive news for the region, the risks and factors that led to the outbreak remain and complacency at this time could be disastrous. In the region, up to 700,000 children under the age of five are not reached on a regular basis by polio vaccine.

Biography

Randa Hamadeh is the head of the Primary Health Care department, and the manager of Immunization and Essential Drugs Program at the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health. She was promoted in April 2015 to be the chief of the Social Health Department. She contributed to creating a PHC network in Lebanon through which preventive programs and community health initiatives could be initiated, usually involving local municipalities and NGOs. Dr. Hamadeh contributed to the introduction of the PHC facility accreditation program in Lebanon in 2008, and is the vice chair of the national accreditation committee. Dr. Hamadeh has actively participated in the foundation of various NGOs. She is the author of many public health papers and booklets. She holds an MPH degree, a PhD in Public Health and a Vaccinology Diploma and is currently a senior lecturer in the faculty of Health Sciences at the Antonine University in Lebanon.

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