



Central European
Digital Media
Observatory



Vaccination programmes are the result of a western conspiracy - a common view in Pakistan

Coffee Beans

**Prof. RNDr.Vanda Boštíková, Ph.D., Prof. RNDr.
Aleš Macela, DrSc**



*A health worker gives polio vaccine to a girl on a street in Lahore, Pakistan (K M Chaudary/AP)

Transmissible poliomyelitis is a highly contagious viral disease of the nervous system affecting the spinal cord (1).

In the former Czechoslovakia, more than twelve thousand people, mostly children, contracted the disease between 1939 and 1956, of whom 1 159 died. Since 1957, vaccination with a non-living vaccine was introduced, followed by a live vaccine in 1960. Thanks to a successful vaccination programme, we achieved the status of "polio-free" (i.e. a country free of poliomyelitis virus) in 1961, being the first ever country to do so (proclaimed by the World Health Organization) (1,2).

The incidence of wild poliovirus in the world has decreased by more than 99% since 1988 thanks to vaccination campaigns. However, countries in the Asian continent, particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan, remain problematic among countries with endemic poliovirus (3,5).

Therefore, all countries of the world remain at risk until the virus is fully eradicated.

Until this is achieved, to minimize the risks and consequences of polio infection, it is necessary to maintain a strong level of immunity in the population through high vaccination coverage and to conduct surveillance of the spread and incidence of infection so that it can be detected and responded to quickly. Therefore, the World Health Organization recommends the continued maintenance of an effective national surveillance (surveillance) system for acute flaccid paralysis with complete case investigation, including virological testing of stool samples in accredited laboratories (1, 3).

Let us take a closer look at the problem in the aforementioned Pakistan. The health authorities and government administration are trying to eradicate polio, but this is hampered by a number of conspiracy

theories propagated by religious groups. They say that vaccination programmes are part of a Western conspiracy to sterilise children, or that vaccines contain pork fat and are therefore strictly forbidden to Muslims. Similarly, warnings are disseminated that foreign members of vaccination teams are conducting espionage to target military activities, troop deployments, or military bases (1,8).

In Pakistan, as in neighbouring Afghanistan, the polio virus is endemic. Vaccination teams here have been constant targets of armed attacks over the past decade. From 2012 to the present, a number of health workers have been killed, as have their guards, without whom the work of health workers in Pakistan is currently unthinkable. Most recently, two police officers and one health worker succumbed to attack by local gunmen. This is the latest in a series of deaths linked to the UN-funded polio eradication campaign. The campaign aims to vaccinate more than 12.6 million children. However, since April 2022, Pakistan has recorded eleven new polio cases – all in North Waziristan where parents very often refuse to have their children vaccinated. Meanwhile, there have been a total of three 30day vaccination campaigns in the country in the last year and a half. During the third of these, gunmen in north-west Pakistan shot dead a female worker returning home after a day's polio vaccination (6-8).

References:

1. Bostíková V, et al.: Polio news. *Epidemiol Mikrobiol Imunol*. 2011;60(1):38-40
2. Skovranek V., et al.: Vaccination against poliomylitis in Czechoslovakia. *J.Rev Czech Med*. 1959;5:97-108
3. Ward NA, et al.: The WHO-EPI initiative for the global eradication of poliomyelitis. *Biologicals*. 1993;21(4):327-33
4. Bahl S, et al.: Global Polio Eradication - Way Ahead. *Indian J Pediatr*. 2018;85(2):124-131
5. Vashishtha VM, et al.: A Brief History of Vaccines Against Polio. *Indian Pediatr*. 2016;53 Suppl 1:S20-S27
6. Bagcchi S., et al.: Polio vaccination in Afghanistan. *Lancet Microbe*. 2022;3(1):e10
7. Rahim S. et al.: The polio vaccination story of Pakistan. *Vaccine*. 2022;40(3):397-402
8. Kanwal S, et al.: Regression in polio eradication in Pakistan: A national tragedy. *J Pak Med Assoc*. 2016;66(3):328-33



Funded by
the European Union
NextGenerationEU



CZECH
RECOVERY
PLAN