

Immunisation



Children queue for measles vaccinations in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

Background

In Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), 191 countries committed themselves to ensuring the highest possible standard of health for children. Immunisation is an essential and cost-effective way to protect and promote that right. In the 20th century, mass vaccination campaigns, combined with improvements in hygiene and sanitation, greatly improved the health of children globally. In 1979, smallpox was officially eradicated as a result of the first worldwide immunisation campaign. Today, the eradication of polio is just around the corner.

Immunisation has proved to be an affordable means of protecting the health of whole communities. In recent years,

three-quarters of the world's children have benefited from routine immunisations, averting more than 2.5 million deaths every year, as well as some 750,000 cases of blindness, paralysis and mental disability.

Yet, every hour, more than 300 children die because they lack access to the low-cost vaccines that could save them. Each year, more than 30 million children are not immunised.

In poor countries, children may miss out because of: lack of political commitment and investment in vaccines; poorly resourced and remote health services; or because families lack information about when and why to bring their children for immunisation. In addition, children may miss out because of war or natural disaster.

UNICEF's achievements

UNICEF is a global leader in immunisation. In the 1980s, we led a campaign to ensure that at least 80 per cent of children were immunised against the six main killer diseases of children. Described as perhaps the greatest mobilisation in peacetime history, it was estimated that UNICEF's campaign saved the lives of 12 million children.

UNICEF promotes immunisation and vitamin A supplementation in order to achieve Millennium Development Goal 4:

- ▶ By 2015, to reduce by two-thirds the number of deaths of children under the age of five

Only 17 per cent of countries are on track to reach this goal.

Information Sheet

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Today, we supply vaccines to 40 per cent of children in the developing world. UNICEF is not only the world's leading purchaser of vaccines for poorer countries (£241 million in 2006), but we also provide cold-chain and safe injection equipment as well as training for medical personnel.

In Pakistan, an estimated 21,000 children die each year because of measles. In 2007, the Pakistan Government, with support from UNICEF, launched the largest-ever national measles vaccination campaign. The goal is to reach more than 63 million children by March 2008.

In Sierra Leone, one child in four dies before their fifth birthday. To tackle this, the Sierra Leone Government's National Immunisation Days (NIDs), supported by UNICEF, have vaccinated more than 90 per cent of children under the age of five against polio and 65 per cent against measles.

In 2006 in Bangladesh, UNICEF and the World Health Organization launched the largest-ever measles eradication campaign, vaccinating 33.5 million children in just 20 days.

"Days of Tranquillity"

Since 1983, this UNICEF initiative has provided vital health care for children trapped in conflict zones. During these special days, combatants agree to a ceasefire in order for children to be vaccinated. Alongside immunisation, children also receive vitamin A and basic treatment for common ailments. The temporary ceasefires have also provided excellent opportunities for warring factions and communities to hold peace talks.

GAVI

UNICEF is a founding member and key partner in the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations (GAVI).

GAVI is committed to saving children's lives and protecting people's health through the

widespread use of vaccines. The partnership consists of international organisations, Governments, the vaccine industry, research institutions and major philanthropists.

The battle against polio

Polio is on the verge of eradication. Between 1988 and 2006, global efforts reduced the annual number of polio cases from 350,000 to 2,000. Currently, there are four polio endemic countries (Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan) and 14 countries where polio has re-emerged. UNICEF is a member of the Global Polio Eradication campaign, which provides an opportunity to immunise millions of children, including those in conflict areas. UNICEF plays a major role in eradicating polio by:

- ▶ Procuring and distributing vaccines, cold-chain equipment, vitamin A and other supplies to virtually all countries affected by polio.
- ▶ Advocating with political leaders and decision-makers, mobilising resources, and supporting training and social mobilisation activities for National Immunisation Days.
- ▶ Supporting Governments to plan, implement, supervise and monitor vaccine activities.

National Immunisation Days

NIDs are mass immunisation campaigns that complement routine immunisation, with the aim of immunising every child under the age of 5 against polio, regardless of whether or not they have been immunised previously. In 2003, during NIDs in 55 countries, over 2.2 billion doses of oral polio vaccine were used to immunise 415 million children under the age of 5. In April 2007, nearly 7.3 million children were vaccinated against polio during NIDs in Afghanistan. Over 45,000 people carried out door-to-door vaccinations for all children under the age of 5.

The six childhood killers

Pertussis (or whooping cough) is a disease caused by a bacteria found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. It is spread through close contact, when an infected person talks, sneezes, or coughs. It can cause severe disease, particularly in young babies.

Measles (or rubeola) is a highly contagious viral infection. Like pertussis, it is spread through close contact. The disease can be very severe, especially for babies under 12 months, who may develop further complications such as pneumonia.

Tetanus (or lockjaw) is a serious bacterial disease that can be contracted through a bad cut or wound. Tetanus bacteria are commonly found in soil, dust and manure. Infection with tetanus causes severe muscle spasms, so the patient cannot open their mouth or swallow, and may even lead to death by suffocation.

Polio (poliomyelitis) is a highly infectious viral disease. It mainly affects children under the age of 3. It invades the nervous system, and can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours. The virus enters the body through the mouth and multiplies in the throat and intestine. One in 200 infections leads to irreversible paralysis, usually in the legs.

Tuberculosis (or TB) is an infectious disease that usually attacks the lungs. It is spread from person to person through the air when a TB sufferer exhales, coughs, sneezes, talks or spits. Though most people carry the disease without becoming sick, a weak immune system increases the chances of developing the disease.

Diphtheria is an infectious disease spreading from person to person through coughing and sneezing. It attacks the throat, which may make respiration difficult.

For further information, visit:
www.unicef.org/immunization
www.vaccinealliance.org
www.polioeradication.org

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