

Out to Fight Polio

By Nasih Othman

Senior Communication Assistant, Unicef Northern Iraq

In the fight against polio in Northern Iraq, another campaign is being launched. After a ceremonial opening, more than 1400 mobile vaccination and 270 monitoring teams started moving house to house in search of children below 5 who are estimated at around 600,000. No cases of polio were reported since 1998 thanks to the many successful polio campaigns undertaken by health authorities with support from UNICEF and WHO.

For Khatoon, a young mother in her mid thirties, it was clear what the drops were given for. While getting her youngest son vaccinated by the mobile team at her doorsteps in a collective town near Erbil, she proudly said “none of my seven children were ever diseased by paralysis or measles or whooping cough because I have always immunized them in time.”

Most of the vaccination teams had this smooth response from mothers. Diler, a team member from Daratoo noted, “ I am participating in the polio campaigns since 1997. I think people are well aware of the danger of the disease, they generally believe in the drops. I have not seen any mother refusing to get her child immunized.”

Dirakhshan, a veteran polio campaigner was telling me exactly the same in front of a door in the remotest mountainous district of Diana when a young mother rushed out from a previously visited house towards her saying, “ my baby was asleep when you came to my house. Now he is awake. Would you give him the drops please.”

Presence of this level of awareness in the community is a prerequisite for the success of any community-based activity. However the facts are not always so encouraging. In a small village on the foot of Mount Safeen, we were right in time for disappointment when we dropped into a house where the team was trying hard to convince the father to bring out his children for vaccination.

“ I don’t give my children any drugs unless they are sick,” said the father. “ I have never given them any drops or injections for prevention,” he continued. “ When they get sick I take them to the doctor.”

It was a chilly day, I tried in my part to convince Hamadamin, “ why do you wear this heavy overcoat? Why don’t you go out in a summer shirt in this weather? ”

“Well that is different. I don’t want to catch cold. But my children, I give them milk, honey, meat and all sorts of good food. They are not in need of these drugs. They have never got the diseases you are talking about. And besides they are my children, I do whatever I like for them.”

Fortunately that was the only refusal case Meena and Maisoon had encountered till now in the area. Meena was a health staff. She had participated in all previous campaigns and recalled that the same thing happened in the previous campaign.

For UNICEF polio eradication is a priority and a major tool for achieving this is polio national immunization days. UNICEF provides vaccines, syringes, cold chain needs and supports vaccinators. It is not strange, so, that UNICEF staff from different sections are involved in monitoring of the activity.

Dr Qasim from UNICEF's nutrition section was impressed by the commitment he found in the teams. "The team leader knocked at a door. A child came out and said that her brother was immunized the day before in the health center," he recalls while visiting a neighborhood inside Erbil. "I was really impressed when I saw the team insisted to see the mother of the child to make sure the child was vaccinated before going to the next house."

Dr. Chimen from the health section had more to add. "In one village in Hanjeerok district a vaccinator himself went on air through the mosque loud speaker to announce the arrival of the vaccination team," she said. "Elsewhere, some teams walked several kilometers to reach a village in order to get to as many children as possible."

UNICEF's observer Christine Calahan, who has been involved in monitoring several campaigns in Suleimaniyah, says "there is a massive amount of effort, communication and coordination required to ensure that hundreds of teams have sufficient supplies and training for the work and knowledge of where they are supposed to go." Yet "it is extremely impressive," she continues, "that whenever you go, even to remote and hard to reach villages with only few children, the mobile vaccination team had been there and had visited every single house."

All children up to age of 59 weeks should get these 2 drops as a way of protecting the child and eradication of the disease in the region. No children within this age limit should be spared. A newborn baby got her name right while she got the polio drops. "A mother brought her child of 8 days who was not yet given a name," said Yousif from Health section. "While giving the drops we helped the mother to find a beautiful name for her daughter." And that was how the beautiful girl was named Shaveen.

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