

Drive to end polio gets huge boost from WHO

By Jenny Llakmani

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WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told cheering Rotarians at the RI Convention: "I am making polio eradication the organization's top operational priority on a most urgent, if not an emergency, basis. "

The drive to eradicate polio will have the full operational power of the World Health Organization behind it, [WHO Director-General Margaret Chan announced](#) at the RI Convention in Los Angeles on Tuesday. Rotarians in the plenary hall cheered as Chan continued: "I am making polio eradication the organization's top operational priority on a most urgent, if not an emergency, basis. "

In a historic moment, Chan was joined at the plenary session by the heads of the other spearheading partners of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative: Julie Gerberding, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Ann

Veneman, executive director of UNICEF; and Robert S. Scott, chair of The Rotary Foundation's Board of Trustees and Rotary's International PolioPlus Committee. It was the first time leaders of all four partners have appeared together on stage and given a joint address.

US\$100 Million Challenge

In introducing Chan, Gerberding, and Veneman, Scott officially launched Rotary's [US\\$100 Million Challenge](#), a three-year fundraising effort to match a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Scott emphasized that polio eradication will remain Rotary's top goal until the job is finished. After outlining the dramatic reduction in the number of polio cases and polio-endemic countries since 1988, Scott challenged the assembled Rotarians: "Who says we can't eradicate polio? "

Calling the Gates Foundation grant a "tremendous honor," he asked each Rotary club to commit to an annual donation of \$1,000 for the next three years.

"I heard of one club yesterday that's going to give \$10,000 a year," he said. "That's what we need! "

Why 1,313 is more than a number

Gerberding described Rotary as an extraordinary pillar of a dream partnership that brings out the best in all four organizations. Stating that 1,313 children were infected with polio in 2007, she called on Rotarians to take that number and turn it into something positive.

"Those children aren't just numbers," she said. "They're sentinels of responsibility. We have not just a health responsibility, but a moral responsibility to protect future generations from this disease."

Gerberding asked those who can to contribute \$1,313 to the eradication initiative. "If you can't contribute money," she continued, "then contribute 1,313 minutes of your time to volunteer in the effort to eradicate polio. If you don't have time, give 1,313 words to motivate others and help inspire the commitment we need to get this job done."

All three of the global health leaders stressed Rotarians' unique part in the eradication initiative. Veneman praised Rotary for playing a crucial role in the immunizations of two billion children since 1988. "UNICEF is proud to be your partner," she said.

Rotarians urged to continue the fight

Chan noted that Rotary is famous in polio circles for its steadfast commitment and determination. Through the respect and trust they have earned, she said, "Rotarians can open doors at the highest political levels, and you can open the doors of homes at the grassroots level."

Stressing that polio is in retreat, Chan assured Rotarians of her personal commitment to eradication, and urged them to continue the fight. To wild applause, she said, "I ask those of you representing Rotary in Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan to do even more. You have been the engines of polio eradication in your countries, and I thank you. But I need you to do more. I challenge you to raise the political stakes even higher, as I am doing with heads of state and political leaders. Political leaders must be mobilized and held fully accountable."

Chan ended her passionate address by thanking Rotarians for "your steadfast commitment to ridding the world of an ancient disease that has destroyed so many childhoods and broken so many hearts. Together," she said, "we will bring this to an end, forever."