

ROTARY INTERNATIONAL



BRIAN KNOWLES AM
Director 1986-1988; Treasurer 1987-1988.
PolioPlus National Advocacy Adviser, Australia

19th January 2014.

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee,
Department of the Senate,
PO Box 6100,
Parliament House,
Canberra, ACT, 2600.

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to you in relation to Australia's overseas aid and development assistance, which has been referred to your committee. I am writing this letter in my capacity as National Advocacy Adviser for Rotary's PolioPlus Program, a position I have held for over 20 years. We are aware that because of budgetary pressures, it has been suggested that there is the possibility of a reduction in this country's foreign aid budget.

As you may be aware, Australian Rotarians have had a major role in the polio eradication program since it was first considered. Sir Clem Renouf, who served as Rotary International President in 1978/79, was deeply involved in the organisation's entry into this humanitarian work, when, during his term of office it was resolved that Rotary would provide funding for a major program of immunizing children in the Philippines against the threat of polio. This project was so successful that it was decided that we should continue our support for children who were likely to be crippled or killed by this debilitating disease.

At the urging of Dr Albert Sabin, who was responsible for the oral polio vaccine, Rotary agreed to set out on a major fundraising effort in 1986 to raise \$120 million by the end of June 1988. Such was the success of this fundraising that the organization more than doubled its target, and with the commitment of those funds, plus a volunteer global workforce of over 1 million Rotarians, World Health at its Assembly later that year resolved to work toward eradication of this disease. Previously their stated aim was control of the disease, not eradication. From an estimated number of 350000 children suffering from the effects in June 1988, the work of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative – a partnership comprising WHO, UNICEF, the Centre for Disease Control in Atlanta and Rotary International – has seen the number of cases globally reduced by well over 99% and the number of countries where the virus is still active reduced to three. In recent years, the partnership been boosted by the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation who have been major contributors. Rotary, itself, has contributed more than one billion dollars to this work, plus countless millions through the volunteer efforts of its members.

Whilst there has been tremendous success to date, WHO have urged all partners to continue their efforts as it has always been felt that the last 1% of cases would prove to be the hardest to eradicate. If we fail at this late stage the billions of dollars already committed to this work will be to no avail. We were delighted when the previous Government approved 2 separate grants of \$50 million and \$80 million. Whilst most of the first of these grants has already been advanced, with the balance due before June 30th 2014, our concern relates to the

second allocation of \$80 million. WHO have factored these funds in to their overall plans for the next 4 years and, because of the importance of these funds at this critical time, we urge the Australian Government to honour this commitment. There is still a shortfall of funding for that 4 year period, a shortfall which the partner agencies are urgently trying to address. The removal of our \$80 million commitment would only exacerbate the problem.

A study published in the November 2010 issue of the journal "Vaccine" estimates that the global eradication of polio could provide net benefits of at least \$40-\$50 billion if transmission of the wild polio viruses is stopped within the next 5 years. Polio eradication is a cost effective public health investment, as its benefits accrue forever. On the other hand, as many as 200,000 children could be paralysed in the next 10 years if the world fails to capitalise on the more that \$10 billion already invested. It is worth noting that 60% of the cases last year occurred in previously polio free countries. That does not mean that an outbreak is imminent in Australia, but it certainly underscores the risk.

Australia has a proud record in relation to the polio eradication program. As stated earlier, Sir Clem Renouf is considered in many quarters to be the father of "PolioPlus". A Brisbane Rotarian and a nurse by profession, Jenny Horton, has worked with WHO in many of the world's poorest countries over recent years in helping battle this disease. Two other Past Directors and Trustees of the Rotary Foundation, Australians Dr Ken Collins and Mr Ian Riseley have worked tirelessly at the international level on this work, whilst countless number of "grass roots" Rotarians have travelled overseas to become involved in immunisation programs in a wide variety of countries around the globe.

On a personal level, apart from my involvement in advocacy in this country, I had the privilege of serving as chair of Rotary's Western Pacific Regional PolioPlus Committee from the early 1990s until 2001 when the region was declared to be polio free. During that same period, I also served as chair of WHO's Interagency Coordinating Committee in the Western Pacific. That committee was virtually the funding arm of the work in the region. Its membership included AusAid, JICA (their Japanese counterpart), UNICEF, CDC, Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. The success of their efforts meant that the region was declared to be polio free much earlier than was originally expected.

I believe that the support of the Australian Government would, in many ways, recognise the incredible commitment of fellow Australians to this wonderful humanitarian project. For that reason as well as for the reason of the life saving benefits that stem from polio eradication, I would urge your committee to ensure that the \$80 million remains committed.

Yours Sincerely,

Brian Knowles AM,
National Advocacy Adviser for PolioPlus.