

25 years of the Certification of Polio Elimination in the Americas: An achievement that encouraged the hope of living in a world free of Polio

In 1994 the Region of the Americas was the first one in the world to be certified. This achievement from the '90s becomes relevant now when there are only two countries is now – Pakistan and Afghanistan – where wild poliovirus still circulates (66 in 2019, as of 20 August. Source: WHO). Today, only one of three types of wild poliovirus remains active and humankind prepares to say goodbye to polio.

On August 24 and 25 1994, renowned scientist and independent experts who were part of the International Commission for the Certification of Polio Eradication officially informed the Director of PAHO, Dr. Carlyle Guerra de Macedo and, through him, the Member States that the transmission of wild poliovirus had been interrupted.

The independent commission's announcement, presided by Dr. Frederick Robbins, translated the efforts of hundreds of thousands of health workers and vaccinators, epidemiologists and laboratory personnel.

The hard work of the immunization team of the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), led at the time by Dr. Ciro de Quadros, the political will and the courageous efforts made in each country helped eliminate the ancient disease, and stopped causing the mourning and disability it was causing. Vaccination coverage in children less than one-year-old went from 25% in 1978 to more than 80% in 1993. At least 8 out of 10 children were vaccinated and thanks to the "herd" immunity, conferred by the Sabin vaccine, collective protection was guaranteed. The wild poliovirus was doomed to extinction.

A decade earlier, May 1985, PAHO/WHO had proposed to its Member States the goal of stopping the transmission of wild poliovirus in the Americas. By consensus, countries made a commitment and they promoted the mobilization of the population and the involvement of strategic partners, churches and civil societies. For their part, cooperation agencies and cooperating agencies multiplied their efforts and provided technical assistance and mobilized resources to contribute to the extraordinary efforts of countries of the Region.



PAHO

In August 1994, after three years without cases in the Americas and based on data obtained by a comprehensive surveillance system involving more than 20,000 centers reporting weekly cases of acute flaccid paralysis and thousands of laboratory samples analyzed the International Commission for the Certification of Polio Eradication (ICCPE), taking into account conclusive evidence submitted by national certification commissions, announced that: Polio had been conquered in the Americas!

Not one more. In August 1991, a child born among the mountains of the Junín Department in Peru was the last victim of wild poliovirus. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Countries, agencies committed to vaccination and strong community participation, today children in the Americas are guaranteed access to free, safe and quality vaccines. The combined efforts made the vaccine a social good, with universal and equitable access for all. Today, the legacy of the 80s and 90s lives on thanks to the work of the new generations of health care workers.

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