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Much needed aid helps Pakistan step up polio fight

The World Bank will give Pakistan a US\$20 million loan to help the government buy oral polio vaccine for a nationwide immunisation campaign

The loan will fund several more national and regional immunisation days. The money has been provided by a new initiative called Investment Partnership for Polio and launched by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Rotary International, the World Bank, and the United Nations Foundation.

"We had a big funding gap. These funds will help fill this", Rehan Hafeez, head of Pakistan's immunisation programme told *The Lancet*.

Last year, 99% of the world's polio cases (98 patients) were in Pakistan, India, and Nigeria. Abdul Haiy Khan of Rotary International in Pakistan warned that the campaign will require "extraordinary efforts" to vaccinate children in the remaining transmission areas. Worryingly, polio is also estimated to increase in Pakistan this year.

On May 26, 30 cases were reported in Pakistan, compared with 21 cases for the same period last year. But "the peak season for polio transmission is coming", warns Tahir Mir, a surveillance officer at the national polio control programme.

Routine polio immunisation coverage remains dangerously low. For example, in Baluchistan province only 33% of children were vaccinated during 2000–01.

Although, Pakistan has been doing at least two rounds of National Immunisation Days (NIDs) every year since 1994, Mir warns: "We need a vigilant system at district level to report all acute onset paralysis cases among children under 15."

Bruce Aylward Coordinator, WHO Polio Eradication Initiative comments that the genetic biodiversity of these viruses in Pakistan is much lower than in previous years and that the latest cases are concentrated in the northern

Immunisation days must be backed up with better surveillance

part of Sindh Province (16) and parts of North Western Frontier Province (8).

The WHO-led Global Polio Eradication Initiative said recently that it will put more resources into polio eradication campaigns in

Pakistan and six other polio endemic countries (India, Nigeria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Niger, and Somalia) and reduce campaigns in polio-free countries.

Khabor Ahmad

SARS back in Canada

The respite was brief. 1 month after appearing to have contained an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), public health officials in Canada's largest city find themselves revisiting their worst nightmares.

"It's not over", disconcerted Toronto Mount Sinai Hospital chief microbiologist Donald Low told reporters on May 25 as the number of cases began to mount from the new institutional outbreak.

The disturbing numbers include eight new "probable" cases, including a 96-year-old man and a 90-year-old woman who died recently, as well as 26 "suspect" cases.

Officials have traced the outbreak to the 96-year-old man, who died on May 1 while being treated for a fractured pelvis at Toronto's North York General Hospital. It's believed he developed SARS while in hospital but was diagnosed as having

routine postoperative pneumonia and was not kept in isolation.

Although officials are at a loss to explain how the man might have possibly become infected with SARS, it seems he infected several other patients in his ward, including a woman who was later transferred to the St John's Rehabilitation Hospital, where she, in turn, infected a health-care worker and several other patients.

Essentially, the outbreak went undetected for weeks but has since got to the point where several hospital wards have been closed, while patients and visitors who entered the North York General, St John's, the Scarborough General or the neurosurgical unit at St Michael's Hospital from mid-May onwards have been asked to go into quarantine.

With the latest deaths, the Canadian SARS toll is now 27 and weary Torontonians are again reaching for face-masks and facing restrictions on visiting

family members in hospital. The city is also fretting that WHO will soon revisit its decision to lift its advisory against travel to Toronto and place it back on its list of dangerous destinations. "It wouldn't surprise me if they put us back on", said Ontario commission of public health Colin D'Cunha.

Meanwhile, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have already reinstated their travel alert to Toronto, telling US travellers to avoid hospitals if at all possible during their visits.

WHO, on the other hand, has not indicated its intention regarding Toronto, but has lifted its advisory against travel to Hong Kong and the neighbouring Guangdong province of China. In its May 26 update on SARS, WHO say the worldwide death toll is now 725, and the cumulative number of cases is now 8202 in 28 countries.

Wayne Kondro