



Islamic Advisory Group Supports Final Push for Polio Eradication

Muslim Leaders Look to Expand Group's Role

JEDDAH, 27 July – The Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication (IAG) adopted today a new work-plan to help in the final push to end polio in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the last two Muslim countries where the virus remains in circulation.

The announcement came at the conclusion of the third annual meeting for the Group held at the Islamic Development Bank's headquarters in Jeddah, which also expressed the group's intention to expand its role by supporting other vaccinations and initiatives that benefit mother and child health.

In the past few years polio eradication has been hindered in some Muslim countries due to misperceptions and lack of safe access to the children for vaccination. In a statement issued by the meeting, the IAG stated that it "reiterates its trust in the safety and effectiveness of polio and other routine childhood vaccinations as a life-saving tool which protects children; and acknowledge that it fully conforms to Islamic rulings."

The statement also affirmed the religious obligation of parents to vaccinate their children to keep them healthy.

Dr. Saleh Bin Abdallah Bin Humaid, President of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, reminded meeting participants of Prophet Mohammed's call (Peace be Upon Him) to Muslims that they should "seek treatment, O worshippers of God, for God did not send down an illness except having sent down a medicine for it apart from aging." Humaid also explained that seeking medical treatment to fight illness does not contradict putting one's faith in God's Will since that is equivalent to eating and drinking to tackle hunger and thirst.

The IAG was launched in 2013 after consultations between the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), Al Azhar Al Sharif, the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) who make up the core membership of the group. The leaders of these organizations, as well as other religious scholars, technical experts and academics from the Muslim World participated in the meeting held today.

Polio Final Push

Among the topics discussed during the meeting was the danger of leaving the public to fall prey to misperceptions and the important role Islamic scholars can play in rectifying people's understanding about health matters.

The deputy of Al-Azhar AlSharif, Dr. Abbas Shouman, said that these misperceptions usually arise due to fatwas that are issued by non-specialists who as a result leave children exposed to handicap or death.

“It is the duty of Al-Azhar AlSharif to explain the truth to people and clarify the facts. Through its many awareness programs it has to explain that vaccination as a form of preventive treatment against disease is a manifestation of the purposes behind Islamic law which aim to protect lives and offspring,” said Shouman.

In his speech to the IAG, the Regional Director of the World Health Organization’s Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Dr. Ala Alwan, said he had witnessed the positive role of the IAG through its local off-shoots during a recent visit to Pakistan in June.

“The impact of your work was evidenced through the positive contribution of the National Islamic Advisory Group (NIAG) in Pakistan at the national and provincial levels and down to Union Council and community level through its engagement with the local religious scholars in giving support and protection to the frontline health workers,” he said.

He also commended the role of the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan for their efforts to eradicate polio, an effort which came about partially through the support of the IsDB.

“The bank has provided technical grants to support the efforts of the Somali government and the partners in order to control the outbreak of polio which spread across the Horn of Africa in 2013,” said Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Ali, President of the IsDB. “It has also provided an additional US\$100 million of funds to support the efforts of the Pakistani government and the partners in order to eradicate polio by the end of 2018, with the Will of Allah.”

Ali urged the partner institutions of the IAG, especially Al-Azhar AlSharif and IIFA, to coordinate with WHO and other international organizations to transfer their experience in polio to other emergency and epidemic situations particularly in Africa.

Expanding their Role

Mother and child health priorities also need to be addressed in order to bring down maternal and child mortality as recommended by the leaders of the OIC at the 13th Islamic Summit Conference held in Istanbul in April 2016.

“Building on the successful experience in improving polio immunization services, the Islamic Advisory Group is now well placed to further help promote health care in the Muslim countries, which still carry a heavy burden of preventable causes of mortality and morbidity,” Ambassador Mohammed Naeem Khan, Assistant Secretary General of the OIC for Science and Technology told IAG members on behalf of Secretary General Mr. Iyad Ameen Madani.

As a reflection of this recommendation the IAG expressed through its statement “the need for this group to promote and influence better health outcomes for families, particularly mothers and children, and commit to expanding the scope of this Group to address other key mother and child health interventions.”

Note to the Editor

Polio is a virus that has paralyzed and killed mostly children for thousands of years. At the World Health Assembly in 1988 Ministers of Health of the member states set the goal to eradicate the disease at a time when the number of polio cases was estimated to be at 350,000 in 125 countries.

Today polio is at its lowest point in history, with only 19 cases reported so far in 2016, 13 in Pakistan and 6 in Afghanistan. This represents a decrease by over 99.9% from 1988. But eradicating polio from these last remaining strongholds has proven to be a challenge requiring the exertion of special efforts by all partners involved.

Once successful, the eradication of polio will be only the second time in history that a communicable disease was eradicated from the world through human effort. The first success came with smallpox which was declared eradicated in 1980 after a global vaccination campaign was led by the WHO.

Unlike most other diseases, polio can be eradicated because it is not transmitted by vector, infect only humans, does not survive long in the environment, and a safe and effective vaccine is available.