

## Polio and Rotary

**T**oday marks the 50th anniversary of the Salk polio vaccine. Poliomyelitis, also known as infantile paralysis, used to be one of childhood's most feared diseases. A few years after Dr. Jonas Salk announced his vaccine on April 12, 1955, nearly every child in the U.S. was protected. Today polio has disappeared from the Americas, Europe and the Western Pacific and is nearly gone from the rest of the world.

A too-little known part of this feat is the role played by Rotary, the international businessman's club, which 20 years ago adopted the goal of wiping out the disease. Rotary understood that medical breakthroughs are worthless unless people aren't afraid to immunize their children and efficient delivery systems exist to get the vaccine to them. And so it mobilized its members in 30,100 clubs in 166 countries to make it happen.

In 1985, when Rotary launched its eradication program, there were an estimated 350,000 new cases of polio in 125 countries. Last year,

1,263 cases were reported. More than one million Rotary members have volunteered their time or donated money to immunize two billion children in 122 countries. In 1988, Rotary money and its example were the catalyst for a global eradication drive joined by the World Health Organization, Unicef and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. In 2000 Rotary teamed up with the United Nations Foundation to raise \$100 million in private money for the program. By the time the world is certified as polio-free—probably in 2008—Rotary will have contributed \$600 million to its eradication effort.

An economist of our acquaintance calls Rotary's effort the most successful private health-care initiative ever. A vaccine-company CEO recently volunteered to us that the work of Rotary and the Gates Foundation, both private groups, has been more effective than any government in promoting vaccines to save lives. It's become fashionable in some quarters to deride civic volunteerism, but Rotary's unsung polio effort deserves the Nobel Peace Prize.