

Muslim leaders urge parents to vaccinate their children



The Islamic Advisory Group convened the fourth annual IAG meeting on polio eradication in Al Azhar Al Sharif on 22 November 2017

Credit: WHO Mona Yassin Cairo, 22 November – The Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication (IAG) today launched a new training manual for students of religious studies in support of polio eradication efforts. The manual provides practical guidance on how to engage with local communities to advocate for vaccination as well as other maternal and child health issues.

The launch took place during the group’s fourth annual meeting that convened at the headquarters of Al Azhar Al Sharif hosted by Grand Imam Dr Ahmed El-Tayyib.

The Grand Imam expressed his happiness to see the progress achieved to eradicate polio in a satisfactory and reassuring manner, saying, “As Muslims we shouldn’t still be discussing a subject that has already been settled a long time ago. This is a situation that has resulted from the misunderstanding of our Qur’an and religion and its teachings.” He asserted Al Azhar Al Sharif’s continued support and announced that the Publishing and Translation Department of Al Azhar will translate the training manual into 20 languages.

IAG leaders thanked the health workers and Islamic scholars who are helping the world realize its goal of eradicating polio once and for all. They also recognized the remarkable leadership provided by the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan and the commitment of their fellow OIC Member States in maintaining adequate support.

Dr Shawky Allam, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, also commended the contribution of the IAG to polio eradication efforts by addressing religious-based refusals on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the past few years, polio eradication efforts have been hindered in some areas of Muslim countries due to misperceptions about the vaccine and the lack of safe access to children. While levels of vaccine refusal are low, they are persistent in certain areas – the very places to which the trained students belong.

Mr Hatem El-Khodary delivered the address of WHO Acting Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, Dr Jaouad Mahjour, in which he commended the work of the IAG and its national affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan in supporting the efforts of the national governments and their implementing partners.

“Islam strongly advocates the preservation and protection of children’s health and well-being,” he said. “Countless prominent Islamic scholars, including those gathered under the IAG banner, have repeatedly confirmed this and have urged Muslim parents and influencers to ensure the immunization of all children.”

Student training programme

Dr Abdelqahir Qamar, Director of the Fatwa Department at the Jeddah-based International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), affirmed that the work of the IAG to protect the lives of children follows what Islam commands its followers.

“We are guided by the teachings of God Almighty, and are enlightened by the instructions of Prophet Muhammad, blessings and peace be upon him, which require us to take care of our health, follow reason in strengthening the body and soul, and command us to seek medication to avert death, and to save the soul from destruction,” he said.

The launch of the training manual follows IAG's efforts to prepare students of religious studies at key universities in predominantly Muslim countries to act as advocates for critical health initiatives particularly in high-risk areas where marginalized and underserved populations reside. As future religious leaders and scholars the students will be well placed within their local communities to promote healthy behavior and dispel rumors and misinformation that hamper the work of vaccination teams and deprive their community members of protection against polio and other vaccine preventable diseases.

The manual was produced for the IAG by Al Azhar University's International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research (IICPSR), which has started training students of Shariah and Arabic language studies from the priority countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia.

Dr Bashier Sallam, Lead Health Specialist at the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), praised the efforts of the center in training the students.

"The bank blesses the initiative of the IAG in engaging volunteer institutions and students of religious studies who were trained to support awareness raising activities in Pakistan primarily in relation to immunization, in addition to taking the vaccine everywhere and bringing it to every child wherever they may be," he said.

In addition to polio eradication, the manual also covers topics related to routine immunization, breastfeeding, birth spacing, care-seeking behavior for pregnant mothers, and hygiene and sanitation from both health as well as religious perspectives. This can help the students address unhealthy practices and taboos that have been inherited by their local communities when they are found.

Ambassador Muhammad Naeem Khan, Assistant Secretary General to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), commended IAG's expansion into these other health initiatives.

"IAG's decision to broaden the scope of its work to improve mother and child health through raising awareness about healthy behaviors and best practices in seeking care is a timely initiative," he said. "The OIC will continue to accord special significance to the health issues due

to their crucial role for the socio-economic development of its Member States.”

The IAG plans to expand the training programme to national universities in Afghanistan and Pakistan where polio remains endemic, as well as in Africa where some countries remain at risk of seeing the disease resurge. These countries also happen to be among those with the highest maternal and child mortality rates worldwide.

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

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**Note for journalist:
History of polio eradication**

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 Member States of the World Health Organization set the goal to eradicate the disease. This was at a time when the number of polio cases worldwide was estimated to be at 350,000 in 125 countries.

Today, levels of wild poliovirus transmission are the lowest in history, with only 15 cases reported so far in 2017 (10 in Afghanistan and 5 in Pakistan). This represents a decrease in cases of over 99.9% since 1988. But eradicating polio from the last remaining strongholds has proven to be a challenge requiring the exertion of special and innovative 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 led by WHO.

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