

This special Rotary Foundation Thought from RI President Wilf Wilkinson kicks off 2008 with some information about polio eradication and Rotary's continuing challenge.

#### R I President's Message for January 2008

Since 1988, when polio eradication efforts began, Rotary International has been a spearheading partner in the fight to end the disease. Longtime Rotarians know the history well. There have been triumphs and setbacks. There have been times of rapid advances and times when progress has seemed slow. There have been times when the end seemed very near. But never has it been nearer than it is right now.

Before the campaign to eliminate polio, about 1,000 children a day – 350,000 a year – were paralyzed by this terrible disease. These children were left to a life of struggle and disability, and often of social stigma. Today, only four countries are still polio-endemic, and annual cases of polio paralysis are down to about 1,000 a year.

We've come so far, yet the nature of the wild poliovirus means that if we slacken our efforts for even a moment, we'll soon see our hard work reversed. We have only two options: to press on with determination and faith until we succeed, or to lose everything we've invested and everything we've gained.

The generosity of Rotarians in responding to the call for help has been astounding. We've raised more than US\$600 million to support polio eradication in 122 countries. We've saved the lives of thousands of children through the polio vaccine and the vitamin supplements distributed with it, and we've saved countless more from the often desperate realities of postpolio paralysis.

Now we're in the final stretch of this long and difficult, but exhilarating, race. It's literally a question of choice – to win or lose, succeed or fail. Our partners around the world have recognized how critical this juncture is, and many have stepped in with added support, financial and practical. The recently announced grant of \$100 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is a resounding vote of confidence in polio eradication efforts. Their financial support will be invaluable in the months ahead, and their trust in Rotary is an honor to us all.

Many of you have already given so much to the battle against polio. Each of you is forever a part of history – part of Rotary's legacy and its gift to the world's children. Today, we call on all Rotarians – but especially on new Rotarians who have not been a part of campaigns in the past – to do what they can, to help in any way they can, to finish this fight once and for all.

Wilfrid J. (Wilf) Wilkinson  
President, Rotary International