

WesternU Faculty Member and WiRED International Board Member Helps in Response to Recent Outbreak in Syria

The New York Times reported this alarming story just several days ago:

The officials said that the discovery a few weeks ago of a cluster of paralyzed young children in Deir al-Zour, a heavily contested city in eastern Syria, had prompted their alarm, and that tests conducted by both the government and rebel sides strongly suggested that the children had been afflicted with polio.

With this finding, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and other health agencies quickly put together an aggressive vaccination program. Polio is highly contagious, it has no cure, and it can paralyze and kill children, especially children under five years of age. Older people may recall the horrors of polio when more than half a century ago alarming images of children in iron lungs and some in heavy leg braces terrified populations worldwide. In the 1940's and '50's, polio paralyzed or killed more than half a million people every year. Polio has no cure, and only one means of prevention: vaccinations. Vaccinations can be oral or by injection, and several doses are required for full immunization.

The WHO vaccination campaign will inoculate children in Deir al-Zour and the surrounding region in Syria, gradually expanding the radius of contact to neighboring countries. While aid workers are facing security problems because of the ongoing conflicts in Syria, they also face the challenge of alerting parents to the need for vaccinating young children.

Dr. Maryam Othman, Western University of Health Sciences College of Medicine Professor and Director of Medical Education and member of WiRED International's Board recently helped create a training module on polio to familiarize health workers about the virus and the havoc it wreaks on the human body [link to <http://www.wiredinternational.org/polioModuleDebut.html>]. As soon as news came about the outbreak in Syria, WiRED, specifically Dr. Maryam Othman and her brother, a physician in Sweden, quickly translated the module into Arabic for WiRED International, and we are now making this Polio education module in Arabic available throughout the Middle East. The purpose of this module is to educate people about this nearly forgotten disease and to explain the need for vaccinations as the only way of stemming the spread of polio in Syria and other countries in which this paralyzing infection is sadly making a comeback.

EXTRA MATERIAL

Facts on Syria

- First outbreak of the crippling viral disease in Syria in 14 years
- At least 22 people, most of them children, are suspected of having polio in Syria
- 4,000 refugees a day fleeing Syrian civil war (Adds UNICEF shipment of vaccines, food for Syrian children)
- 100,000 people killed in Syria's conflict
- 2 million Syrians have fled country to date

Source: WHO/United Nations