

Letter to the Editor

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on polio care: a warning

Dear Editor,

The recent coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has had an immense impact on healthcare systems worldwide, which have to deal with the challenge of simultaneously responding to the needs of COVID-19 patients and managing other life-threatening disorders. Several Western and developed Asian countries (e.g., South Korea, Japan), hit by the pandemic had to substantially reorganize their healthcare systems, redistributing personnel and resources to deal with the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19¹.

Many polio services and teams in many countries, including Pakistan, have been closed, according to local and WHO health resources and organizations². These actions have impacted standard polio care, including the delivery of time-dependent treatments and patients' relationships with their families.

Every year on October 24, the world celebrates World Polio Day, particularly celebrating the determination that has enabled the world to almost completely eradicate polio. On this day, healthcare providers around the world consider how to eliminate this disease completely. In Africa, thousands of polio eradicators have fought the disease, and by the passing year, polio has been completely eradicated from Africa. However, in two countries worldwide, including Pakistan and Afghanistan, there is still transmission of wild poliovirus³.

However, polio workers have faced many challenges in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been estimated that, during the last eight months, eighty million infants have missed critical vaccines, leading to massive increase in many vaccine-preventable diseases, such as polio⁴. The WHO, along with national governments, is working to rebuild immunization systems that have been affected by the pandemic. Due to budget shortages and the high cost of vaccinations, governments must provide extra funds to deal with outbreaks of diseases, such as polio and measles.

Few, if any, studies have examined changes to the quality of polio care in Pakistan during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the government has noted changes to polio care due to lockdown policies, most reports lack systematic information due to the difficulty of data collection during this challenging time. Cases of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) in several regions of Pakistan have increased in 2020 compared to 2019. In the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan, no cases were reported in 2019; however, in 2020, 22 and 2 cases have been reported in these provinces, respectively⁵. Cases of cVDPV2 have increased in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well (Figure 1).

The registered data enable a comparison of polio incidence in 2020 to that of previous years. This increase in polio cases is still unexplained. Since polio is a major cause of disability in Pakistan, the best polio care should be ensured, even during challenging times. High-quality polio care is necessary to avoid undoing the excellent achievements of recent years in improving polio outcomes.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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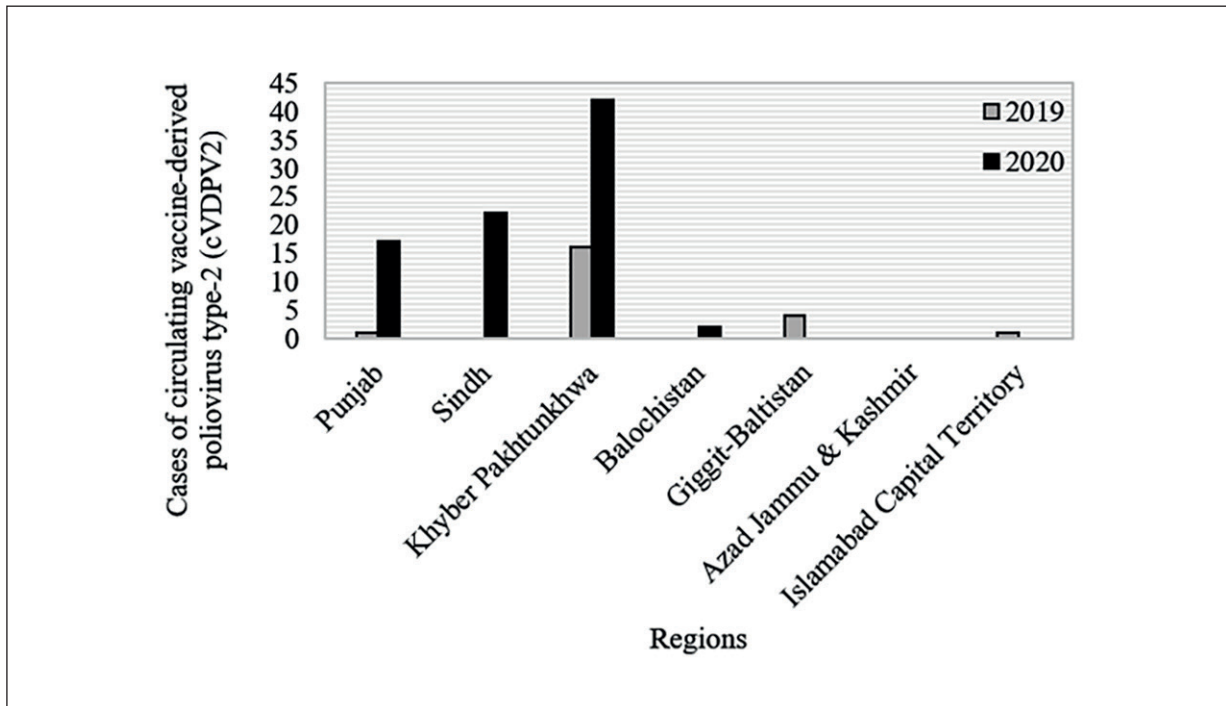


Figure 1. Cases of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) in different provinces of Pakistan. (Source: [https:// www.endpolio.com.pk/polioin-pakistan/polio-cases-in-provinces](https://www.endpolio.com.pk/polioin-pakistan/polio-cases-in-provinces)).

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