

Health officials not on track to eradicate polio

July 20 2011, By MARIA CHENG , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- The world is not on track to wipe out polio by the end of 2012, a group of independent health experts warned Wednesday.

Since 1998, the [World Health Organization](#) and partners have been trying to get rid of the paralytic disease that mostly hits children. But progress has stalled in recent years and some have questioned whether [polio](#) can actually be eradicated.

An independent group said in a new report released Wednesday that it was "unshakable" in its view that the global effort to stop polio by the end of next year is at risk. Two previous eradication targets have already been missed and the effort costs about \$1 billion every year.

"Unless some hard messages are given with no holds barred, progress will not be made," said Sir Liam Donaldson, chairman of the group that was formed last year at WHO's request. He added the experts still thought eradication could succeed but radical changes were needed.

Polio is a [waterborne disease](#) that mostly strikes children under five. To eradicate it, officials need to immunize more than 90 percent of children in the handful of countries where it still circulates, including Afghanistan, Angola, Chad, India, Pakistan and Nigeria.

Donaldson and his colleagues cited numerous problems, including tricky situations in the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), Chad and Angola and Pakistan. The report also described some shocking cases of bad

vaccine campaigns, like falsified immunization reports and paid vaccinators hiring children to do their work.

Dr. Donald A. Henderson, who led WHO's smallpox eradication campaign decades ago, called the report "refreshingly honest," saying some past U.N. assessments have been too optimistic.

"It's very useful to get a reality check," he said, saying that if the program fails, the impact on WHO and its credibility could be devastating.

Dr. Bruce Aylward, who leads WHO's polio eradication program, welcomed the report. He said WHO and its partners will implement as many of the group's suggestions as possible, like tightening surveillance and data collection and improving how they talk to the public about polio vaccines.

"If these were easy things to do, they would already have been done," he said.

Aylward said the biggest threat to stopping polio by the end of 2012 is the virus' continued spread in Pakistan and Nigeria.

"You have to think of every risk as a potential Achilles heel," he said. "Getting to polio eradication will require extraordinary programmatic perfection."

More information: <http://www.polioeradication.org>

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