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## Polio still exists in the world? It sure does



<u>Christine Dalgleish</u> 2 days ago



During the Rotary District 5040 Conference 2022 held in Prince George the community-service based organization held an End Polio Walk Saturday morning. | Citizen photo by Christine Dalgleish

Polio survivor Ramesh Ferris was the guest speaker during the Seven Wonders of Rotary District 5040 Conference 2022 held in Prince George this week.

The community-service based organization took on many topics including disease prevention and treatment where Ferris talked Saturday morning about the efforts made to permanently eradicate the preventable disease from the world.

After his talk, the conference included a Polio Walk to raise awareness of their efforts.

Ferris was born in India and contracted polio at six months old because his birth mother didn't know there was a vaccine available to prevent it. At 18 months old he was sent to an orphanage and was adopted by Canada's Anglican Bishop of Yukon and his family in 1982, becoming the first International adoptee in the Yukon Territory.

After his adoption, Ferris received corrective surgeries at BC Children's Hospital and learned to walk for the first time at the age of three and a half with assistance of braces and a walker. Later at the age of four he was able to walk with braces and two crutches.

Ferris returned to India in 2002 as an adult, met his birth mom, and saw what life would have looked like for him if he hadn't been adopted in Canada.

Many people in India who have polio move about their communities on their hands, dragging their bodies along the streets.

After seeing what life looks like for some polio survivors, Ferris made a vow to make a difference in their lives and ensure the virus could not claim any new victims.

In 2008, Ferris hand-cycled 7140 kms across Canada from Victoria, BC to Cape Spear, Newfoundland & Labrador in a polio campaign he called Cycle to Walk. Through this campaign Ramesh raised \$300,000 for Polio Eradication, Education, and Rehabilitation.

Since his Cycle to Walk polio campaign Ferris has become a global advocate in the fight against polio. Ramesh has travelled to Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and many other places. He has partnered with organizations including the (Global Poverty Project, Global Citizen, Rotary International, WHO, UNICEF, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) all to encourage global citizens, and world leaders to continue to support efforts to end polio permanently.

Ramesh has his social work degree and has been inducted into the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame. He is the recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Award, and the Yukon Commissioner's Award for Volunteer Public Service.

"It's such an honour to travel to Prince George and speak at the Rotary District 5040 Conference," Ferris said. "Since 1985 Rotarians made a promise to the world that they were going to eradicate polio in partnership with the World Health Organization's Global Polio Eradication Initiative and since the Rotarians have contributed well over \$2 billion USD in the fight against polio."

Through that effort, more than three billion children have been vaccinated by participating in international immunization days where a Rotarian would volunteer their time and go to countries like India and Nigeria and provide those drops of the polio vaccine to the children. Ferris added.

"It's a boots-on-the-ground effort by those volunteers providing those drops and I think that's really quite amazing," Ferris said. "To put it into context, in 1988 when the World Health Organization's Global Polio Eradication Initiative started it was estimated that there was 350,000 cases of polio annually spread out over 125 polio-endemic countries and to date we're not talking about 125 countries – we're down to two countries – Pakistan and Afghanistan – and the case count is, I believe, four right now, which is absolutely amazing. But having said that one case is one too many. We saw with Covid-19 how quickly the virus spread so that's the same thing with polio – it can spread like wildfire in unvaccinated populations. So that's says that one case of polio in the world is one case too many because we're all just a plane ride away."

An example of that is Mozambique, a southern African nation, that hasn't had a case of polio for 30 years and the World Health Organization announced they have a case of polio that was traced back to Pakistan.

"This proves that in unvaccinated populations polio is a threat to everyone," Ferris said. "So my message to Rotarians is to thank them very much for their continued generosity and support of a polio-free world but our work is not complete and I am not going to give up my

advocacy efforts until we've actually crossed over the finish line and my hope is that we will all continue to remain steadfast in our commitment until we have a polio-free world."

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