



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

NOTE FOR THE PRESS



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**Note for the media WHA/2
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WHO HONOURS POLIO ERADICATION VISIONARY

The World Health Organization (WHO) today honoured a founding personality in the global effort to eradicate polio. William T. Sergeant, for 12 years the leader of the programme overseeing polio eradication within Rotary International, received a personal citation from the WHO, at the World Health Assembly.

Mr. Sergeant, 86, has served in Rotary International for nearly six decades – chairing its International PolioPlus Committee for 12 of those years. The private service agency decided in 1985 to make polio immunization an organizational priority. Impressed by Rotary's years of experience using volunteers to immunize large numbers of children against polio worldwide, the World Health Assembly adopted a resolution in 1988 to eradicate polio. Mr. Sergeant was at the forefront of this early collaboration, which turned into the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, and has played an increasingly critical role in ensuring the political and financial support necessary.

Dr LEE Jong-wook was to present the citation to Mr Sergeant, a man he considered a dear friend, and a "towering force and a legend in global polio eradication." Due to Dr Lee's sudden death, Dr. David Heymann, his Representative for Polio Eradication, presented the award on his behalf.

"Under Bill's guidance, this partnership has set the gold standard for private - public partnerships to improve global public health," said Dr. Heymann.

Mr. Sergeant's vision guided the formation and direction of the Initiative, which is led by Rotary International, WHO, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UNICEF.

"Your leadership in this great effort has brought us closer to the reality of a polio-free world, and improved the lives and futures of millions of children," Dr. Heymann added at the presentation ceremony in the Assembly hall.

In accepting the award, Mr. Sergeant – who retired this year – quipped that the "the noble goal deserves the leadership of someone younger than 86". He noted that his efforts were voluntary, saying he was honoured "in being recognized for a labour of love" and thanked "the members of the World Health Assembly, for your courage and devotion to the goal of polio eradication".

Under Mr. Sergeant's leadership, Rotary International contributed US\$ 650 million to the world's largest public health initiative, which has reduced the incidence of polio by 99% and brought the poliovirus to the brink of eradication. Two billion children have been immunized against polio over the years and five million children are walking today who would not have been doing so without that immunization.

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