



**ROTARY INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT 9830 (TASMANIA)
RECEPTION TO MARK WORLD POLIO DAY
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
GOVERNMENT HOUSE, MONDAY 26 OCTOBER 2026**

Good evening, everyone and welcome to Government House for this reception to mark World Polio Day 2026.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Palawa people as the First Peoples of lutruwita/Tasmania and the Traditional Custodians of the land we're gathered on today.

For countless generations, they have cared for this island, its landscapes, its waterways and its communities, and I'm grateful to be able to live here.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to any Aboriginal people with us today. Your continuing contribution to the cultural, social and spiritual life of our State is deeply valued.

Polio is a highly contagious viral disease that is incurable once contracted and can lead to varying degrees of disability and even death. It can, however, be prevented with vaccination. Polio affects the central nervous system where it can lead to paralysis along with subsequent muscle atrophy and contracture.

In Australia it is estimated that, between 1930 and 1988, some 20,000 to 40,000 Australians developed paralytic polio and that there were around 400,000 polio survivors. Many of you may know someone who suffered from

the disease. The worst instances left victims reliant on artificial respiration, what was universally referred to as an iron lung, for the rest of their lives.¹

We are very fortunate that an effective vaccine was developed in the 1950s and due to large scale vaccinations, Australia was actually declared polio **free** in 2000. This really was one of the great health advances during our lifetime. Whilst there has been no known local transmission since 1972, there does still remain a risk of infection due to the importation of polio from overseas.²

Rotary has been at the forefront of eradication efforts throughout the world for more than 45 years with the goal of complete eradication of **all types** of polio. First in the Philippines in 1979 and then as a founding partner of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, Rotary has worked to establish the Rotary Foundation to support these initiatives.³

I would like to acknowledge incoming Chair of Trustees of the Rotary Foundation and Past Rotary International President Mr Gordon McNally and his wife Heather, who are visiting from Scotland, as we mark World Polio Day together.

World Polio Day is commemorated each year on 24 October to highlight the importance of ongoing polio vaccination to protect lives and safeguard public health around the world. The date was chosen as it is the birthday of Jonas Salk, who as I'm sure you know, led the first team to develop a vaccine against poliomyelitis in the early 50s.⁴

¹ <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/remembering-australia-s-polio-scourge> accessed 19 Oct 26

² https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/560100cb-b5ce-42e9-85ed-76be4435de3a/aihw-phe-236_polio_2025.pdf accessed 19 Oct 26d

³ https://www.rotary.org/en/our-work/ending-polio?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=24059671354&gclid=CjwKCAjw3NHWBhANEiwAtpwldxmEGfhnjx1ljo_iFnXf-E6GUqLKyE3OrL3AG-Y-B36XhiE33S_5YiBoCyBwQAvD_BwE accessed 19 Oct 26

⁴ <https://isid.org/world-polio-day/> accessed 19 Oct 26

Happily, we know that, due to the global efficacy of vaccination campaigns, type 2 and type 3 polio are considered to have been eradicated, in 1999 and 2020, respectively. Unfortunately, the remaining type 1 which is the most virulent strain remains endemic in Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁵

While polio used to be a major cause of death and disability throughout the world, the number of cases diagnosed each year has decreased by more than 99% since 1980. But because of this persistence of type 1 there is still work to be done. In Pakistan, almost 400,000 workers are part of the world's largest surveillance network and also work in supporting laboratories, data systems and as epidemiological leaders and as a result, cases have continued to decline from 74 in 2024 to 30 in 2025. To May 2026 **only six** cases have been reported in both Afghanistan and Pakistan combined.⁶

As part of the Polio Eradication Initiative, Rotary and partners have vaccinated more than **3 billion** children globally and contributed more than \$2.9 billion to date through the PolioPlus Project. It is, however, estimated that ceasing vaccinations could risk up to **200,000 new cases** a year within a decade. We cannot afford to let this happen.

So, today is a day to remember the impact of polio and to reaffirm that more work is required to reach the aim of global eradication of this horrible disease.

We must also remember, however, that there is much to be proud of and to celebrate. The eradication of two types of polio and the significant reduction in reported cases in the only endemic countries mean that vaccination programs are effective and that the goal of total eradication is achievable.

⁵ https://www.who.int/health-topics/poliomyelitis#tab=tab_1 accessed 19 Oct 26

⁶ <https://polioeradication.org/news/pakistan-and-afghanistan-unite-to-protect-millions-of-children-in-synchronized-polio-campaigns/> accessed 19 Oct 26

To all Rotarians here, thank you for the work that you have done and continue to do to eradicate polio, both at home and abroad. It is just one example of the lasting change that Rotarians across the globe commit to take action to achieve for the benefit of their communities.

Please enjoy the reception and Rob and I look forward to speaking with you less formally as we share the evening together.

Thank you.