

Report on Poliomyelitis in the Trust Territory (1950-1963)

On January 21, 1950 an outbreak of poliomyelitis was reported at the Majuro Intermediate School in the Marshall Islands. Initially, five cases were diagnosed clinically but the incidence increased to thirty-six cases by January 24, and the final figure reached sixty-three by January 27.

A clinical diagnosis of poliomyelitis was made in each of the above reported cases and treatment rendered, but attempts to obtain virological confirmation were unsuccessful. One death and one residual paralytic case resulted from this outbreak, and a Salk vaccine immunization program was undertaken following this incident with each resident of Majuro having received two doses of vaccine. However, the program was halted during the latter part of 1959 due to a lack of funds to purchase the necessary vaccine and to administer such an extensive preventive measure.

From 1953 to the outbreak of January 12, 1963 there were no reports of paralytic poliomyelitis in the Trust Territory. There also were no reports to this office regarding any plans for the institution of a preventive program.

On January 4, 1963 a nine year old American girl, a two year resident of Kwajalein Island, developed poliomyelitis after having returned from a trip to Texas where a previous epidemic had been reported. A Marshallese youth, with parents who worked on Kwajalein, developed poliomyelitis symptoms and spread the disease to Ebeye, an island three miles away, where all of the Marshallese employees live. Reported cases mushroomed throughout the Marshalls District as carriers traveled from island to island. The toll was 212 clinical cases of poliomyelitis and 11 deaths, the onset occurring January 12, 1963 on Ebeye.

Trust Territory medical personnel, with the invaluable assistance of the military and other U. S. Government agencies, voluntary organizations and private industry located in the area, brought the epidemic under control. An extensive rehabilitation program is currently underway, and a mass immunization program is almost completed. The Trust Territory Government is presently formulating plans for the development of continuing immunization programs to prevent the spread of other preventable communicable diseases.