ASPHER – The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region

ASPHER Statement

Polio in Gaza – A call for an immediate ceasefire to carry out a critical poliovirus immunization campaign

This is an ASPHER Statement led by Association member schools in the Region:
Al Quds University School of Public Health, East Jerusalem;
Ben Gurion University of the Negev School of Public Health, Be'er Sheva;
Hadassah Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Hebrew University, Jerusalem;
Haifa University School of Public Health, Haifa;
Tel Aviv University School of Public Health, Tel Aviv; and
initiated by the ASPHER Public Health Emergencies Task Force.

On July 16, 2024, vaccine-derived type 2 poliovirus (cVDPV2) was confirmed in sewage samples obtained from Gaza in late June 2024, marking the first sign of the spread of the virus in the area. In response, WHO recommended a mass vaccination campaign using the novel type two oral polio vaccine (nOPV2) and began collaborating with UNICEF to release 1.2 million doses for two consecutive vaccination campaigns. On Friday August 17th 2024 reports emerged of three children with acute flaccid paralysis, which, combined with the sewage findings, strongly suggests poliovirus infection. Laboratory tests are currently being conducted in Jordan to confirm these cases. Given the high proportion of clinically silent infections in polio, these findings indicate a major outbreak of vaccine-derived type 2 poliomyelitis.

The war in Gaza has resulted in a dramatic breakdown of basic sanitation facilities with extremely limited access to fresh water, combined with overcrowding, poor living conditions and constant movement of populations. The circumstances have created ideal conditions for the rapid dispersion of viruses such as polio, bacteria, and parasites, particularly those spread by the faecal-oral route. The polio outbreak is a public health emergency within a public health emergency. Routine immunization programmes have been severely interrupted. The detection of poliovirus in the environment and the appearance of clinical

cases is another wake-up call to immunize all children, not only against polio but also against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis, and measles, mumps and rubella.

The only way that the vaccination campaigns can be successful is under conditions of a complete ceasefire. The safety of healthcare workers who will administer the vaccines must be a top priority. In addition, the nutritional status of the children in severe war conditions may adversely affect the immune response to the vaccines. Infants and children with sub-optimal nutrition may also be at increased risk of developing complications from the different infectious diseases. Thus, the nutritional needs of the children should be addressed.

We at the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) are responsible for training and supporting public health professionals. As members of ASPHER, we call upon the government of Israel and the Hamas to agree on a total ceasefire to allow for comprehensive and effective vaccination campaigns and to ensure sound sanitation and adequate supplies of clean water for the population of Gaza. This is both our humanitarian and public health responsibility for all living in the region.

Fourth ASPHER statement with regard to the conflict in Israel-Palestine. 20 August 2024.

ASPHER's previous statements with regard to the War in Gaza are:

ASPHER statement condemning terrorist attacks on civilian populations. 10 Oct 2023. ASPHER website. Available at: https://www.aspher.org/download/1449/aspher-statement-condemning-terrorist-attacks-on-civilian-populations.pdf (first statement)

Statement of the ASPHER Task Force on War and Public Health on the Conflict in Israel/Palestine. Public Health Rev, 23 February 2024, Volume 45: https://doi.org/10.3389/phrs.2024.1607047 (second statement)

An urgent call for peace and an escalation of humanitarian responses in Gaza. 29 May 2024. ASPHER website. Available at: https://www.aspher.org/download/1531/20240514-aspher-gaza-humanitarian-statement.pdf (third statement)