

An effective vaccine plus a less contagious disease led to rubella eradication in the Americas

By ACSH Staff — April 30, 2015



Health officials from the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization [announced](#) ^[1] at a meeting last week that rubella, aka German measles, has officially been eradicated from the Americas. As was the case with elimination of polio and smallpox, this region is the first to achieve this goal after a 15-year effort. PAHO/WHO director Carissa F. Etienne pointed out that this region was the first to eliminate these diseases, and added that these achievements prove the value of immunization and how important it is to make vaccines available even to the remotest corners of our hemisphere."

Rubella is a less serious disease than measles at least for adults and children. But it can have devastating effects on fetuses. If a pregnant woman (particularly in the early stages of pregnancy) contracts rubella, her newborn has a high risk of serious congenital defects including cataracts, deafness, heart defects and brain damage.

According to the PAHO/WHO, before mass vaccinations, anywhere from 16,000 to 20,000 children in Latin America and the Caribbean were born each year with such defects. During the last major outbreak in the United States (in 1964-65), 20,000 babies suffered these ailments. Furthermore, 11,000 other instances of disrupted pregnancies attributable to the virus were detected.

What has made it possible to wipe out rubella? First, it is not as contagious as some other viral diseases, such as chickenpox and measles. Second, the vaccine against rubella (now part of the MMR vaccination) is over 99 percent effective. These two factors in combination with effective public health [outreach](#) ^[2] have rendered rubella a disease of the past at least in this hemisphere.

Other parts of the world are not rubella-free, including Europe, Japan and the Middle East, so vaccination is still necessary to prevent illness from cases imported by travellers from these regions.

It's rather ironic, commented ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava, that this MMR vaccine which has been attacked falsely for causing autism, has actually helped eradicate rubella. One can only hope that

the anti-vaccine folks take note of this great achievement and re-think their opposition.

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Links

[1] http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10798%3Aamericas-free-of-rubella&catid=740%3Anews-press-releases&Itemid=1926&lang=en

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/health/rubella-has-been-eliminated-from-the-americas-health-officials-say.html>