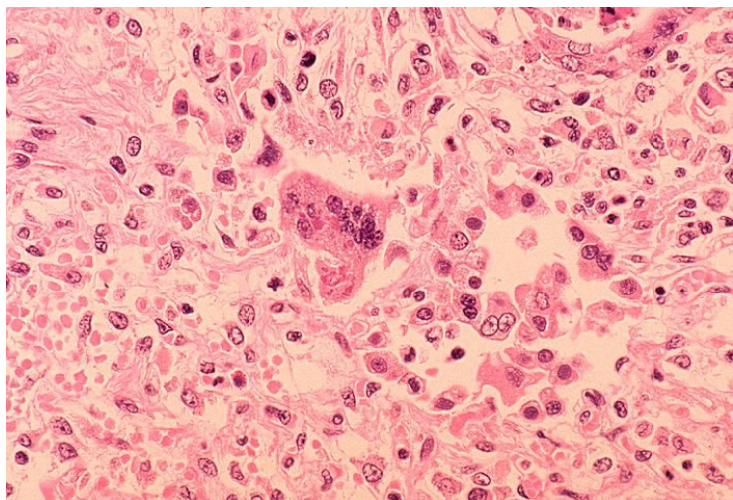


Bhutan and Maldives are the first Asian nations to have eliminated measles

21 June 2017 | News

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Singapore: Bhutan and Maldives are the first regions in WHO South-East Asia Region to have eliminated measles, a highly infectious disease that is a major childhood killer globally. The regions have been verified for having interrupted endemic measles virus transmission, ahead of the 2020 Regional target, said WHO. Bhutan and Maldives launched their Expanded Program on Immunization in 1979 and 1976 respectively, and since then worked indefatigably to increase access to immunization services.

Measles elimination and rubella control by 2020 has been one of WHO South-East Asia Region's flagship priority programmes since Dr Khetrpal Singh became Regional Director in February 2014.

Announcing the findings and conclusions of the WHO South-East Asia Regional Verification Commission for Measles Elimination and Rubella control, Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director of WHO South-East Asia, commended the countries for momentous public health achievement. She said, "The strongest political commitment, alongside the concerted efforts of health workers, officials and partners at all levels, has helped achieve this landmark success, which is a boost to the Region's effort to eliminate measles and control rubella."

Maldives has not reported any case of indigenous measles since 2009, and Bhutan since 2012. To fortify their progress, both countries have been carrying out mass vaccination campaigns with measles and rubella vaccine covering high-risk populations.

"Both countries achieved and maintained high coverage of measles vaccination, despite geographical challenges. They also established strong laboratory-supported surveillance for measles, and have conducted detailed case investigation and tracking, right up to the very last case," Dr Khetrpal Singh said.

"To meet the 2020 measles elimination and rubella control goals, all countries need to make greater efforts to increase

measles vaccination coverage through childhood immunization programmes, as nearly 4.7 million children remain unvaccinated against measles in the Region annually,” Dr Khetrapal Singh, concluded.

An estimated 620 000 measles deaths have been averted in 2016 alone following vaccination carried out by Member countries. Nearly 107 million children have been reached with an additional dose of measles vaccine through mass vaccination between 2013 and 2016.