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**Statement by Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe for  
European Immunization Week  
22 April 2014**

## **“Happy birthday, EPI!”**

Almost exactly 40 years ago, in May 1974, the World Health Assembly started the Expanded Programme on Immunization – EPI – buoyed by the unprecedented success of the smallpox eradication programme. The objective was clear: to vaccinate children across the globe against tuberculosis (TB); diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis; poliomyelitis (polio) and measles. Ten years later, in 1984, WHO created a standardized vaccination schedule against these diseases, on which WHO Member States have since built their schedules. New vaccines were added as technology and the understanding of immunology advanced.

While many countries in the WHO European Region are close to full immunization of children aged under 1 year, there is still work to be done. With measles, unfortunately, the Region has more than just unfinished business; in the last few years some precious gains have been lost.

Even though none of us can afford to let up on our efforts, European Immunization Week is a time for celebrating the impressive and undeniable achievements of immunization. Vaccines are widely held to be one of medicine’s greatest achievements.

EPI has played a significant role in the progress we celebrate. Before its initiation, although the European Region was well on the way to developing robust systems, worldwide coverage of child vaccination against TB, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio and measles was less than 5%. Today the European Region is polio free, and most countries have achieved over 90% vaccination coverage via effective routine immunization systems.

An old adage says, “Life begins at 40”, and EPI, 40 years young, is as relevant as ever in the European Region and worldwide. On this happy occasion, I applaud each and every Member State taking part in European Immunization Week, and each and every health care professional whose daily work takes us one step closer to a world in which people are protected from preventable diseases.