

J. Philip Klinger District Superintendent

A POLIO SURVIVOR: MY STORY

I am speaking on behalf of all polio survivors everywhere ... sharing with you some of my (and their) insights, experiences, dreams. I feel a unity with all of them.

Nov. 28, 1945 - still reveling in the spirit of jubilation following the end of W W II. Life was good !!

I was 7 years old - came home from school with sore throat and slight temp. Next afternoon, excruciating h.ache and rising temp. and aching muscles. Early eve., crawled out of bed to go to the bathroom from nausea. Legs immediately collapsed - could not stand up. My mother picked me up and once again my legs buckled - Apparent I could not stand -

Temp. = 104° - called dr. - came to house - asked me to once again try to stand - touch chin to chest - could do neither - called an ambulance - rushed to Methodist H. In E.R., I was given a spinal tap - Dr. said either poliomyelitis or spinal meningitis. Lab results indicated former - polio of the bulbar type - most serious as it usually caused total paralysis - and eventually IT DID. Sent to private room - round the clock care -

2 a.m. struggling to breathe - rushed to Riley Child. Hosp. I remember gasping for air as doctors and nurses rushing and in a panic to prepare the iron lung. Aspirator down throat to suction mucous from lungs. Tight cuff around neck ... When lid closed on iron lung - remember panic of being closed in but relief that I could, once again, breathe. I was in total paralysis - could not move any muscle of my body - could neither breathe nor swallow - was fed through a feeding tube-

Once again, taken to Isolation - no visitors - in iron lung for 3 weeks and in hospital 3 months. (Carts - hall - white sheets).

Hospital records recently: Pt. = gravely ill; prognosis very poor

After recovery, went home in Feb. - family celebrated late Christmas that year. Felt plucked from fire for special reason which I did not yet understand. Those to whom much has been given, much shall be required. From that point - felt such a strong desire to repay for this gift of life - decided I wanted to be a missionary - or perhaps, JUST PERHAPS a pastor's wife - and look what happened !

To all people born after 1955, the word polio draws a blank. To many people today, paralytic poliomyelitis seems as distant

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as leprosy or the bubonic plague. Mention polio to someone born in the twenty or so years before 1955, and you get a quick startled glance of recognition. They remember the childhood summers spent in protective detention, exiled from city, shore, swimming pool, amusement park, movie theatre.

Children were taught to be afraid of polio, to regard it as kind of monster - lurked around corner - damp hollows - in or around water. Don't lean too close to water fountain - water hydrant - play in puddles after rainstorm - go near the pond - polio may get you - everyone could recall poor soul - got to near source of water - came down with polio - water became the universal culprit to be feared and avoided at all costs. One survivor was quoted: "Two things of which I most terrified - polio and the atom bomb" In 1940 - 10,000 cases - by 1952 - 58,000. With this rapid rise in numbers, - every reason to assume it would only rise steadily - soon no one would be safe from the mighty crippler.

Polio viruses - obviously, had always been with us, but until this century - not been identified. As early as 1789 - doctors recorded small outbreaks of mysterious disease - characterized by fever, contagion, paralysis - usually death - cruel preference for children - thus the name infantile paralysis - poliomyelitis preferred by physicians, indicating inflammation of gray matter surrounding spinal cord. After WW II, shortened to polio in order to fit the word into newspaper headlines - as it was so often the featured article on the front page.

Research ultimately confirmed that polio was indeed a viral disease - attacks the cells of the nervous system. It struck lightly at first - a summer cold - a headache - a mild fever - then suddenly, a small body falling - the pain of the little arms and legs twisted inward on themselves - or most fearful sound of all = the choking rasp that came when the lungs forgot how to pump and throat how to swallow.

Iron lung came into use in 1930's - truly a medical gift to those who could no longer breathe on their own. Weaning from the respirator - terrifying as nurses cajoled and encouraged pt. out of the machine - first for minute or two - then five - then an hour - finally overnight. I remember - fear as I tried to fall asleep that first night without the security of my breathing machine.

Polio survivors had to find new reserves of courage, determination, and sheer grit - the qualities which would get them thru their current ordeal and ultimately, through life. Most polio survivors are tough - determined - have strong coping devices.

After the terrible epidemic of 1916, there was not a year that passed without a major rise in the number of cases. By 1932,

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- groundswell of new cases that in large cities - patients were turned away by frightened hospital staff - due to overcrowding and fear of contagion. In 1935 - entire city of Annapolis MD - quarantined.

January - 1953 - mothers organized for polio - marched for the March of Dimes for polio research - raised 50 million dollars - encouraged people to participate in the program of testing a possible new vaccine -

Jonas Salk had created this potential vaccine, and in the spring of 1954, eleven states took part - first vaccine trial. No one, parent or child knew which child received the actual vaccine, as opposed to the placebo. A year later, they would find out which group was which. The majority of parents, with some trepidation, allowed their children to participate. These children were known as Polio Pioneers.

On April 12, 1955, the long awaited announcement came. The vaccine was 90% effective. In 1952, there had been 58,000 cases - in 1957 - the first year the Salk vaccine was widely used but not universally required - there were 5,000 cases. By 1961 - year the Sabin vac. (live but weakened virus on sugar cube) was introduced, the number of cases - dropped to 3,000. No one who had lived through the terrifying epidemics could doubt that it was a glorious day - world first heard the verified proof that hope and protection - indeed a reality -

Jonas Salk refused ownership of patent for vaccine - said it would be like any one of us claiming a PATENT FOR THE SUN. "The patent for this vaccine - belongs to mothers - marched so valiantly for March of Dimes - to parents and children - became willing participants in the vaccine trial".

VICTORY OVER POLIO - 2 inch headlines - run over front page mastheads following the announcement. For one day - at least - hydrogen bomb tests and Supreme Court hearings on school desegregation were not the top of the news.

IN CLOSING - like to mention - approx. 300,000 polio survivors in U.S. alone - some victims of continuing nightmare - never ending. Approx. 40 - 50% - now suffering from post polio synd. - a crippling after the fact degeneration - strikes decades after initial onset - often creating symptoms - worse than the initial disease. Many theories about the reason include - the rigors of rehab. caused early onset of arthritis and other degenerative diseases. Another theory - due to destruction of muscle and nerve endings - other fibers had to compensate and take over for those which were destroyed. The surviving muscle fibers and nerve endings may be wearing out prematurely due to overuse. The very toughness on which polio survivors ~~prided themselves finds them back to the braces wheelchairs~~

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- respirators - they struggled so valiantly to discard.

In other parts of the world - polio very much in evidence - withered arms and legs of men/women unable to work or care for their children - severe handicaps among the most vulnerable - the children -

In an age - when AIDS, cancer, Alzheimers, asbestos, radon, toxic waste, germ/chemical warfare, and a host of other biological and environmental threats cloud our consciousness, the conquering of polio gives us hope and the expectation that perhaps - just perhaps - these scourges will be controlled or even eliminated.

Bless You All from all of us who are polio survivors and from all people for your commitment and effort and generosity toward the total eradication of polio all over the world.