



Rancho Los Amigos

Post-Polio

Support Group

Newsletter - August-September 2018

Nightmare: A Child's view of Hospitals just before World War II

Dedicated to the thousands of children who endured untold misery in hospitals because no one told them what was happening. And to the countless parents who gave unstintingly of themselves to love and care for those children in spite of the rigid system that existed so many years ago.

© Bryan Rowley 1934-2016, former National Chairman of the British Polio Fellowship

Prologue

Bryan woke up terrified, shaking and clammy. Clawing his way back to reality from the terror that engulfed him, he felt a warm hand reach out and pull him close. Whispered words of comfort helped him to realize that it was not real, just a repeat of the nightmare which came so often these days.

The world in which we live is a complex place, made up as it is from real objects and the mental images we conjure up from them. Any one incident can be reported as many different ways as there are observers.

Bryan was only one observer, but the pictures were recalled by the chain of circumstance which led to the present revelation of long past events, buried very deep in his subconscious, even beyond any current memory.

This story is true. The events happened, and only vary from fact in very small details, which were not clear as the recall was made from deep subconscious.

(Continued on page 2)

No article in this newsletter may be reprinted without written approval. **No** article may be edited. The full text of an article, including most graphics, can be obtained by request. Please send requests to: RanchoPPSG, 12720 La Reina Avenue, Downey, CA 90242 or **RanchoPolioGroup@gmail.com** *Please notice. Our email address has changed.*

The information presented at our meetings and/or contained in this newsletter is solely for information. It is not an endorsement of any product, medication, or individual.

(Continued from page 1)

In the beginning

The doctor at Newcastle Royal Infirmary looked grave as he spoke to the anxious parents.

"I'm afraid there is nothing more we can do, Mr. Rowley. This condition, poliomyelitis, is beyond our skill. Your son will never walk and will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. It is not terminal, he should live a reasonable length life and should not get any worse. Had we been able to make a diagnosis sooner, then just possibly"

The quiet words fell on deaf ears as the shattered parents tried to grasp the meaning of the statement. Their younger son, three years old, wheelchair... never walk ... incurable.

What did it mean?

One thing was certain, they would not give up.

His father brought Bryan to Harlow Wood Orthopedic Hospital, in Mansfield, where the surgeon, Dr. Malkin, thought that something could be done. Then, with no sort of promise of success, he sold his chiropody practice and house, rented a house and took employment to be near the hospital.

It was not in vain. Bryan did make progress and after operations and treatment spread over many years, he walked unaided to live a full and happy life, going to university, marrying and having a wonderful family, but burying the traumas as he enjoyed the liberty.

Over fifty years later, he was bluntly brought face to face with his memories, because a child he loved was laid low with a hip disease necessitating hospitals, splints, plasters and learning to walk again.

This brought on the nightmare.

The Nightmare

The child was brought into the room, bright with light and his mother undressed him, tucking him into bed. So this was Hospital. Strange pieces of equipment stood around the room on tables and trolleys, steam rose in a corner where a large shiny sterilizer bubbled away. It might be an interesting place after all. Suddenly, things changed.

"We have to go now, son." His father said gently. Tears flowed, not only from Bryan. "I don't want to stay here. I don't like it." He sobbed, but to no avail. With a swift. "We'll be back this evening." They were gone and a brisk, starched nurse appeared to scold him for the noise.

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

For the rest of the afternoon strange people kept coming and going, looking at him, measuring him, moving his tiny, misshapen feet and thin legs and talking in words he did not understand. No, they didn't talk to him, but over him, to others. If he cried, he was scolded so he cried inside, willing his mother to come and take him home.

His parents did come, but not to take him back. They played with him and talked for what seemed such a short time before the bell rang and they had to go, leaving him alone as it grew dark.

Looking round the ward, into which his bed had been moved, he saw other children. Funny, he hadn't really noticed them before, while his parents were visiting. Some were crying, a soft, haunting wail, some had huge humps in the bed near their feet and some were tied up with ropes and weights over pulleys and just lay, silent and wide eyed.

Was he going to be tied up like that if he didn't stop crying?

Nurses came and went, sometimes holding his hand, not gently like mummy did, but putting a stick thing in his mouth. It tasted horrid so he tried to push it out, but the eagle eye fixed him and demanded that he hold it in his mouth under his tongue. "But don't bite."

Supper arrived and was set before him. He couldn't eat, terror had put a knotty lump in his throat.

"Try and eat it up." Said a small, smiling nurse. "Sister will be cross if you don't and you won't have anything in the morning before your operation."

Most of them seemed to be cross for one reason or another, and he hadn't got a sister anyway, only a brother, so there didn't seem much point in bothering about making a sister cross. As a gesture he swallowed a mouthful and his smiling nurse praised him, scooping some potato and meat off his plate on to another she was clearing away.

Soon it was dark. The lights were switched off and a sort of silence descended on the ward. If he listened very carefully, he could hear the sterilizer bubbling away, over the noises of quietly sobbing children as they tried to find some comfort in a favorite toy, their only link with home and their own bed. Some lay silent, gazing into the darkness. One or two chatted and laughed until a lady in a blue dress and funny hat came and told them off. Weren't you allowed to laugh in hospital?

It was still dark when Bryan woke as someone pushed his bed back into the side room. What had he done now to be told off for? A nurse turned down the covers and took off his pajamas before washing him all over.

"Turn on your side." She said as she pushed him over and held him firmly.

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

He felt something cold being pushed into his bottom. Curious, Bryan tried to turn to see what it was but a strong hand pushed him back and he felt something running into him, making him feel full and frightened. He wanted to go to the toilet but couldn't because a hand pinched his bottom together. Bryan wailed in fear.

"Nearly done." Was all that was said as he was hauled upright with the hand still pinching his bottom and plonked on a big china dish thing. The hand let go and he felt a great rush of water pouring out of him. This was wrong. He didn't wee from there, but there was no way he could control the rush. He was wiped and laid down again, still wondering what it was all about. He had been told that he was to have an operation to make his legs better. Was that it?

He was left for a long time and heard sounds of breakfast in the ward. Had they forgotten he was there? A nurse came in and he asked her.

"No breakfast for you." Was the crisp answer.

No explanation of what he had done wrong, just a plain statement. Ages later another nurse came, a different one and took off his pajamas. Not that again! He thought, but she didn't. She brought a tray and painted him with bright yellow stuff, his feet, his toes, his legs. Right up to his waist and round his bits and bottom. To make my legs better? Bryan did manage a little laugh as he wiggled his toes.

The laughter soon stopped when she stuck a needle into his arm. "Just a little prick." She said cheerfully as it went in, but it hurt, a lot.

His howls grew quieter as the drug took effect. Bryan's mouth was dry and he wanted a drink but it was refused. Banging doors marked the arrival of a man with a trolley. The nurse lifted him on to it and held his hand as they went out of the ward along lots of corridors before turning sharply through some more doors into a room with a nasty smell. Fear grew as people with white covered faces came round and he clung to the nurse's hand, screaming as someone put a pad on his face, pouring some liquid on to it. The foul smell went down into him so he stopped screaming and fought, holding his breath as long as he could, struggling to turn his head away. A familiar noise, the bubbling of a sterilizer, grew louder as he struggled less, breathed deeper and everything went blurred and disappeared.

When he woke it was dark and he was still very frightened inside. Bryan felt a familiar touch and found his mother's hand holding his. She whispered to him, nice, comforting words. He couldn't move and any attempt made him feel awful. The smell of the stuff came back to him and he was very sick. Everywhere seemed to smell the same and he panicked. Gentle hands held him, hands he knew mopped him up and helped him feel more secure.

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

Bryan tried to wiggle his toes, and couldn't. He tried to tell his mum about them painting his bits yellow ... but couldn't speak. Night became one round of nausea, half sleep and a growing feeling that his legs hurt, really hurt.

Eventually he fell into a disturbed sleep and woke, crying, as daylight came. A nurse lifted the end of the blanket and moved something. Terrible pain shot up his legs, causing him to scream again. Seconds, or was it years, later he felt another prick and drifted off into a deeper sleep. Later that day, when his parents came, his answer to every question was the same. "My feet hurt."

Propped up on pillows, he was horrified to see that he had after all been tied up with wood and string and when the blanket was turned back for someone to look at his toes, he saw that his feet were covered in big white boots, right up to his knees. One had strings fixed to it and there were red patches near his ankles. Toes peeped out of the end so he knew that his feet were still there, but he couldn't move them. Bryan just cried until it was time for his parents to go, then cried some more because they had gone.

Gradually days became more settled. He got used to doctors and nurses coming and doing things. Some things were alright, like the doctor who tickled his toes each day until he found out that they would, after all, still wiggle, but others, like medicine and injections, were not nice at all. Perhaps the thing he disliked most of all was not being able to go for a wee when he wanted to. Every so often there was a 'bottle round' but he never seemed to want to go then and when he asked, they were cross because 'he hadn't gone when it was time.' It was all very confusing.

They were cross when he couldn't and were still cross when he did want to go.

His parents came and went, often bringing something nice. Funny, when he was at home and wanted something, he was sometimes told they couldn't afford it. Now they could. Maybe that was why he was here. Maybe they couldn't afford for him to be at home.

The next operation came round. Dad told him it would be tomorrow and everyone was pleased how much better his feet were after the first one. Bryan was not happy with the idea. How did they know? His feet were still in the hard white boots. They didn't hurt so much now, but then they did not hurt before the operation. No one had seen his feet so how could they be better?

He was afraid of more nasty things happening and howled as soon as his bed was wheeled out of the ward early next morning, to the side room. Sure enough, his fears were realized. Stripped of his pajamas, he fearfully asked, just so that he knew, if he was to be painted again.

The nurse only said. "It will be alright, don't worry." He felt only slightly reassured, she hadn't told him what was happening, only that it would be alright so he supposed it would be.

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

Suddenly, as the tube was pushed into him again, he felt cheated. It was the same again. It wasn't alright. The same full, uncomfortable feeling. The loss of control of himself as it was released. They didn't care about him; they just did what they wanted anyway. He stopped crying, hoping they would stop if he was good, but they painted him anyway and stuck the needle, 'just a little prick', in again.

It still hurt. The nurse smiled at his tense, wide eyed little face and said what a good boy he was. So he weed up in the air, wetting the bed, the gown and the nurse. That felt better, even though she was very cross and had to do most of her work again.

His new found courage lasted but briefly. The arrival of the porter and the trolley brought fresh waves of panic and he howled all the way to the operating theater and until he was asleep.

Waking brought fresh pain, more sickness and the feeling that this was going on forever. His parents were there but they somehow seemed less reassurance. Was he going to stay here forever? Awake and asleep, he progressed towards consciousness.

His feet hurt. They had done it again.

Why didn't they leave his legs alone and stop hurting him again as soon as one hurt went away? His feet hadn't hurt before he came here.

Then he saw there were no beams or strings. Maybe his feet were better after all. He couldn't move them and didn't want to look at them.

Someone came to look at his toes, which seemed silly, they had already found out that they were alright. He looked away and shut his eyes as the blanket was lifted.

It was quite some time later when he looked at his feet again. They were still the same. Disappointment welled up. White, hard boots, red round the ankle, yellow upwards from his knees. They weren't better. They were just the same. They had just hurt him again. Bryan cried and cried in despair.

When his parents came again they could not understand why he wouldn't talk to them. They seemed to know that he hurt inside as well as his legs. They tried to sound comforting but he simply couldn't believe them. They had caused all this. Why had they brought him from his safe, comfortable home where, albeit with limited movement, he had felt safe, to this place of fear and hurt?

He had no words to tell them how he felt inside, so he just cried. Maybe they didn't want him there anymore. Had they got another little boy instead? One with proper legs? He cried himself to sleep.

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

Time passed, months of it, and the hospital became a more hospitable place. His parents still came, they still brought him nice things and they still seemed to love him. Very slowly he realized that it took a long, long time for feet to be made better, needing several operations so that it didn't hurt too much at once and so that part could be done and the next bit later

Why had no one told him he would be here a long time?

Before long he confided in his mother about the things they had done to him before the operation. She smiled and told him it was alright. Everything had to be specially clean she explained. Even grownups had to have those things done.

He felt a bit better. The things that frightened him didn't seem so bad now that mum knew about them. He tried to be brave next time. He still cried when things hurt but it was no longer the despairing cry of a child who thinks things are hopeless.

After many weeks, twelve in all, the doctor came and said that he could have plates on his plasters and try walking. Off he went to the plaster room where there was lots of wet splodgy plaster and some funny things like half shoes with no tops were stuck on the bottom of his feet with wet plaster. He would have enjoyed playing in that room.

The lady was nice and let him play with a bit of wet plaster until it went hard. She told him that this was how his plasters had been made and when the doctor said so, he could try walking.

The thing he liked most about her was that she had covered up the patches on his ankles. They had been red when his feet hurt and then had turned brown. Now he couldn't see them at all to remind him of hurt.

Next day, although it seemed like ages later, the doctor came again and he was lifted off the bed. He tried to stand up but was all wobbly and fell over. The nurse stopped him falling, but the plaster boots were so heavy that he couldn't move his feet. Maybe he wouldn't ever be able to walk like the other children.

The doctor said he could go home, and it seemed like magic when his parents came with his very own clothes and dressed him again. His big feet would only just wriggle into his trousers and he had socks rolled up over his toes. Then an ambulance whisked him off home.

When Bryan arrived home he looked around, but nothing seemed the same as he remembered. He had been away three months and missed the hospital. Panic again.

"I don't live here." And later; "I don't go upstairs to bed." Similar phrases were all he could find to express his feelings. Everyone was kind and he soon came to feel the security of home and family again.

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued from page 7)

Then began the hardest part. The long round of trips backwards and forwards to hospital for physiotherapy and clinics became an established routine and little by little, he could get about. He could begin to ride his trike and be a bit like other children. He could walk a bit, but it was hard and he fell over more often than not. He struggled on until he could manage quite well. He lost count of how many times he was taken to the other hospital in town to have cuts stitched!

Six months later, the plasters were removed and he was fitted with strange metal calipers and leather boots which seemed so light after his big white boots, but they took a lot of putting on and off with so many straps and buckles.

It was to be years of treatment and more operations before everything was finished when he was fifteen, but....

Bryan did walk...and ride a bike...and go to school...and ride a motor bike ... and drive a car.... and a lorry.... and a bus...and sail a boat and have a wonderful family of his own.

AND.... most and best of all, it gave him the understanding and patience to love and help a little girl to walk, just as his parents had loved and helped him.

Epilogue.

We may be thankful that most children today have operations explained to them before they happen and hospitals have a greater understanding of their psychological and personal as well as medical needs.

Even so, there are many traumas from which it is very hard to escape. Many things can lie hidden for years, to emerge when least expected. Memories are always present and cannot be put aside forever. Time does not heal, it merely allows us to accept what is.

The consolation is that children who have been through trauma often grow up to be more understanding of the needs of others. Often it seems that they have been dealt a rough hand but, by grace, they can become 'Gold, tried in the fire.'

When this was originally written I changed the names because I could not face the reality of myself as I tried to come to terms with the nightmares of my memories. Now I realize the real truth is that it is not only my story, but one of countless, nameless children who suffered as I did. There was a ten-year-old child in the hospital who had been there for nine and a half years. He was really abandoned.

The debt of gratitude owed to my parents for their faith and innumerable sacrifices could never be repaid, even if I knew its full extent, this side of Glory.

(Continued on page 9)

(Continued from page 8)

The extent of some of those sacrifices I only learned in later life. I owe them the duty ..., no ..., the joy, of using my experiences to help lighten the load of others. ~ *Bryan*

- - - - -

We appreciate that David Mitchell, National Chairman of the British Polio Fellowship, <https://britishpolio.org.uk/> has given us permission to reprint this moving account of a young child's perspective on the often frightening hospital experience. Many of our readers were young during their hospitalization. They may, or may not, remember their experiences. It might be helpful, even therapeutic, to record your own recollections.

We polio survivors are a dwindling minority. This is good. We wouldn't want others to deal with the trials and obstacles we have faced. On the other hand, our experiences are worth documenting. Polio shaped our own lives, and the greater community of the mid-twentieth century. We shared many experiences, but each person's perspective is unique. Would you like to share your story with us? Email us at: RanchoPolioGroup@gmail.com

Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County

The Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County has a new meeting location. They will meet at the **Newland Street Church of Christ, 13852 Newland Street, Garden Grove, CA 92844**

Their next meeting will be **Saturday, September 8, 2018 - 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.** The topic will be "Sharing ideas and 'gadgets' to live well with PPS". They will also discuss what you should include in your evacuation "To Go" kits. Both of these topics are important, and they are often informative for our friends and relatives. Bring someone with you!

The Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County is now meeting four times a year. Their last meeting for 2018 will be **Saturday, November 10, 2018 - 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.** The timely subject will be the Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program (HICAP). You will learn about any changes in Medicare coming in 2019.

Contact information for the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County

Newsletter Editors: Janet Renison - 949-951-8613 - renison@lagunawoodsvillage.net
or Baldwin Keenan: - 949-857-8828 - abaldwinkeenan@gmail.com

Do you have agenda ideas for the Orange County group? Please call Aleta at: 949-559-7102, or email Priscilla at: prisofoc@aol.com Their WEBSITE is: www.ppsupportoc.org

Meetings of the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group



Photographs from our June Picnic - Dave Elder took the photos, so he was not in them.

Our next meeting will be, **August 23, 2018, from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.** at Mary's home. Mary lives at 2691 Faust Avenue, Long Beach, CA 90815, near the intersection of East Willow Street and Woodruff Avenue. It would be very helpful to know if you are planning to attend.

The September meeting will be at the "Café La Reina" - another name for Richard Daggett's backyard, 12720 La Reina Avenue, Downey, CA 90242. This will be on **Saturday, September 22, 2018, from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.** September is usually very warm, but there is plenty of shade at "Café La Reina"..

For many years we have used the Support Services Annex (SSA building) at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center for our meetings. That building was closed this summer for remodeling. We hope to have a new meeting location at Rancho later this year.

We appreciate the support that Rancho continues to provide our group.

During the great polio epidemics of the 1940s and 1950s, Rancho was the largest polio center in the United States. Rancho had the capacity for 192 polio patients, almost all of them with some degree of pulmonary impairment. Rancho still serves polio survivors at a weekly Polio Clinic, and in the other specialty clinics which have made Rancho Los Amigos famous.