



Rancho Los Amigos

Post-Polio

Support Group

Newsletter - April, 2014

In our August 2013 newsletter we asked readers to submit their early recollections of polio. The story below is the first chapter of Ben Patrick's polio recollections.

Polio Revisited

By Ben Patrick

Chapter One, The Onset of Polio

It was a Monday morning and time to get up, go downstairs, have breakfast, and leave for school. I was seventeen, and this was the beginning of my senior year of high-school. I would soon have my eighteenth birthday. As I walked down the stairs I noticed that I was limping. I knew right away!

The previous few days I had severe headaches, high fever and flu like symptoms, visited Dr. Law, my family doctor, and was diagnosed as having "the flu" which was "going around." Also, the day before I woke with a limp my friend Eugene Emminizer's mother had called to inform me that Gene was just diagnosed with polio. A couple days before I got "the flu" Gene and I had spent the day together, golfing. So, I knew.

I told my parents about the limp. Mom called Dr. Law only to discover that the doctor now really had the flu. She in turn called Dr. Willoughby, who promptly ordered a spinal tap for me at Trumbull Memorial Hospital. I had the spinal tap and the results confirmed the presence of polio virus in my spinal fluid. There are three strains of polio virus and my spinal fluid contained all three strains! Panic time!

I didn't even spend the night at Trumbull Memorial Hospital but was immediately shipped

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off in an ambulance to Cleveland City Hospital, (sixty miles distant), a hospital specializing in polio and spinal meningitis treatments. It was a large hospital, stuffed full, mainly with polio patients. Soon after arrival most meningitis patients died. Scary times for a seventeen year old, actually for everyone concerned. This occurred in September, 1951, one of the peak years of the polio epidemics in Ohio. Four years before the Salk polio vaccine was introduced.

There was no certain understanding of how the polio virus was transmitted or contacted or how to care for the polio patient. There were many opinions, much speculation, and consequently fear based procedures. Even today there is little understanding about these aspects of polio. I was the only high-school student having polio, (of twenty-five hundred students attending my school). The high school administration at first panicked. What to do? Close the school? Cancel Friday night's football game? Calm prevailed. They did nothing.

As I lay in the hospital bed, thoughts, regarding my predicament, raced through my head. My mind was full of guilt. As I was raised in a very conservative Baptist Church, I was sure that God gave me polio, as a punishment for my sexual thoughts (oh yes, those thoughts are evil and abnormal for a seventeen year old!), God is cruel and vengeful. And, when my parents showed up with their preacher who subsequently stood by my bed and prayed over me, I did feel rage. It was very awkward for me lying there and that pompous, obnoxious bastard didn't have a clue as to my feelings. His portrayal of religion seemed very much like witchcraft. He raised his quivering voice and prayed on and on.

During the first month of hospital stay, the fever subsided and slowly paralysis set in. My right leg became weaker and weaker until I could hardly move it. I could only wiggle the toes on my right foot. I had partial paralysis of my right shoulder, arm, and fingers. My right arm became so weak that I had to learn to eat left handed. Along with the paralysis came tendon tightness. I was so stiff that it was impossible to lay flat on my back and rise up just on my elbows. I couldn't lean forward and touch my knees. My hamstring tendons had shrunken dramatically. Also, I had some paralysis of my lower right back. Fortunately there was only very minor paralysis, if any, on my left side. Having one strong side proved to be a big help in my recovery and in my coping.

I was to remain in the Cleveland hospital for over seven weeks of treatment. At first the primary treatment was comprised of heavy steaming hot towels "hot packs" (named "The Sister Kenny Treatment"), placed on my upper body, torso and legs, as I lay on my stomach. This procedure was repeated several times a day. Also, my bed had a board placed between the mattress and box spring. Why the board, I'm not sure. Later, after I returned home I still slept on a board that my Dad placed under my mattress, and slept like that for several years. Now sixty years later, having post-polio syndrome, I get comfort using a board again.

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Finally, the paralysis stopped spreading and worsening but I was “stiff as the board.” The next treatment step was “to break me loose” (at that time the vernacular for stretching). Off I went on a gurney to the physical therapy room. After arriving, I somehow was placed on my back, lying flat on a mat on the floor. Next, a therapist sat on my legs to hold me firm and a second therapist kneeled behind my head and pulled up on my shoulders. Ouch! Huge pain in the back of my legs! The therapist finally stopped, the stretching session ended and somehow I was lifted and placed on the gurney, and was taken back to my room. This was the most painful part of my polio experience.

The “breaking loose” sessions continued, twice a day, for the remainder of my stay in the hospital. Slowly I became more and more flexible. It was a major achievement just to touch my knees with my legs being held straight. Eventually, as I reached further below my knees, I could finally touch my toes! And once I had lost most of the stiffness I was able to move about, even make it to the bathroom! My right side remained very weak and trying to walk was extremely difficult. Holding on, I made it around the room. Eventually, I tried a few steps without holding on or falling down. Yeah! I did it! However I had a great sweeping limp as I went along. At least I was standing and moving!

A day in the hospital was comprised of long hours of laying in bed, decent food, and little company as my friends and relatives were all sixty miles away. I spent my time listening to the radio (no TV), reading, and chatting with my roommate and the nurses. My roommate was a teenager of German decent. When his parents visited, they spoke Deutsch and I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. My roommate, speaking in English, kept lamenting to the nurses about how much he missed having a beer as he had been accustomed to having it at home. Finally a sympathetic nurse brought each of us a beer! My very first beer (no alcohol at home), I was under age and I consumed it in the hospital!

Actually, the time passed at a decent pace. I loved reading travel adventure books and can remember spending many hours reading two of my favorites, Kon-Tiki and Tibet. And that fall it was the Brooklyn Dodgers vs. the New York Giants in the 1951 National League Pennant playoffs and the “shot heard ‘round the world”. When Bobby Thompson hit the home run that won the pennant for the Giants, the screaming Nurses were literally dancing in the hallways. I would have missed one of the most famous moments of Major League Baseball history if I had been back home in school that October day.

Somehow the hospital doctors decided that it was time to discharge me. So, in early November, 1951, my parents came to Cleveland to pick me up and take me to our home in Warren, Ohio. Upon departure we were given little, if any, instructions on how to proceed with my care once I was home. We were virtually on our own and it turned out that I didn't visit a doctor or

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physical therapist regarding my polio injuries for thirty six years until 1987! That doctor was Dr. Jacquelin Perry at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center, in Downey, California.

And, my parents, having modest income, were concerned about paying the hospital bill as charges for seven week plus of hospital stay must have been horrendous, even back in those times. Finally, by mail, they received the hospital billing statement, opened it, and read “Paid in Full”! What a surprise. The March of Dimes had paid the total amount!

Upon arrival at home I discovered that my bed had been moved downstairs to the living room. There were no bedrooms on the first floor and I wasn’t able to manage stairs until after several months of effort. Fortunately there was a bathroom on the first floor, down a hall with a mirror at the end. That mirror became very important in my recovery.

It was good to be home again. Home cooked meals, our dog to pet, television, and visiting friends. Virtually every day my friends would stop by on their way home after school for a short visit. That was a great help in keeping my spirits up.

Fortunately I had a positive attitude that I would completely recover. My plan was that one day I would be able to walk securely, without a limp. My goal was to graduate from high school and to walk down the isle at graduation, without a cane.

Every day I would work on flexibility and muscle strength, at first mostly with my dad’s assistance. Recovery was to be a slow and deliberate process. I had no hamstring strength in my right leg and hence was unable to lift and bend up my lower leg as I lay on my stomach. So, my Dad would lift and bend my leg for me. He repeated the lifting and bending twenty or thirty times a session, every day. This process continued for several weeks until, one day, I was able to slightly raise my lower leg! Each day my leg became a little stronger until I could finally lift and bend it full range, without my Dad’s help. Next, I wore a shoe, which added weight, and with my Dad’s help, I continued to bend and lift my leg. Soon, more strength returned and I was able to lift and bend all by myself, still wearing the shoe. This process continued by adding a steel plate strapped to the shoe, then adding a dumbbell bar which went through a tube that Dad welded to the steel plate. After several months’ exercise effort, the final step was adding weights to the bar for even more resistance.

I expanded the exercise routine to include exercising other leg muscles and my polio damaged arm muscles, mainly on my right side. Not all muscle strengths improved but in general the exercise and stretching helped immensely. My leg muscle strength and balance improved to where I could walk more assuredly, but with that great sweeping limp. I began walking down

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the hallway with the mirror at the end. As I walked I would watch myself in the mirror and try not to limp. I spent hours walking down the hallway, looking in the mirror and trying not to limp. I didn't realize it until years later that I was actually training my brain to lock my right quadriceps as I walked. As I walked with locked right quadriceps my sweeping limp began to diminish. After many months of effort I was able to walk with a much less noticeable limp.

Sister Kenny promoted swimming as a beneficial exercise for polio recovery. Fortunately I already knew how to swim, loved to swim, and swimming seemed to be a good thing to add to my exercise routine. Five high school students volunteered to meet me at the local YMCA for an hour of water therapy, one student, each of the five school days per week. The guys were Walter Wilson, Elmer Yenchochik, Ronnie Wilson, Steven Leigh, and Ken Wicks. We invented games to play which included lots of swimming. Our favorite game was to bounce a handball off the wall and swim race to retrieve it. During one of the swimming sessions I kicked the side of the pool and fractured the large toe of my polio injured foot! This accident added another impediment to my walking.

The swimming sessions continued throughout the school year. Also, during this time, the YMCA offered a Senior Life Saving course in which I enrolled, completed, and became a certified life guard. I was limping on land, but in water I could get around quite well. Swimming every weekday did seem to help improve my overall leg and arm strength. In addition to swimming and weight training daily, I went to the local hospital for whirlpool treatment once a week.

I wanted to graduate from high school the following spring. To this end, I needed to be tested in order to qualify to have home instructional aid from the school district. One day, an official from the school district came to perform the testing. I don't remember much about the test except that he asked me to repeat after him a series of random numbers. First I was asked to repeat a series of five random numbers. He read the complete series. I responded, repeating the total five numbers. Then it was ten random numbers. From memory I was able to repeat the complete series without error. Then it was eleven, etc. After I was able to correctly repeat somewhere between fifteen and twenty numbers he gave up and pronounced that I did indeed qualify for instructional aid at home.

My in-home tutor was Col. Don McEwan, my high school math teacher. He came several days a week to teach me trigonometry, English literature, and civics. Finally, I was able to return to school a couple of months before graduation. And I did meet my goal of walking to the stage at graduation ceremonies to receive my diploma. I also went limping to the senior prom.

Gee, I thought, since I'm certified, maybe I can get a summer job as a lifeguard? That would

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be ideal, being paid to swim while working on my recovery! Off to City Hall to submit an application. Now the tricky part began. I was a very strong swimmer, but I limped. Soon came a request for an interview. The interview was at the Aquatic Director's office at the municipal pool. I arrived thinking that I must conceal the fact that I limp and was recovering from the effects of polio! The receptionist ushered me into the Directors office as she walked ahead of me. She didn't seem to notice the limp! I quickly sat down. The Director came in the office and proceeded with the interview. He finished. Now, how do I get out of here with out having my limp detected? Lucky for me, the Director went to the door as I followed behind. We bid good-bye, he went back into his office, and I left. Whew! I did it! I was later hired for the summer.

That summer I continued to progress in gaining arm and leg strength and improving my walking. The daily swimming helped a great deal. My right arm, though slightly weaker, was almost back to normal strength and size. Full use and strength of my fingers returned. Certain muscles in my right leg improved slightly in strength but never returned to normal strength or size. I was able to resume driving using my right foot to accelerate, with hardly enough strength to push the accelerator pedal, and using my left foot to brake. I still drive that way today, sixty years later.

Within one year of contacting polio I was off, on scholarship, to the University of Cincinnati to major in electrical engineering. After leaving for the university, I spent very little effort in exercises for the next thirty-five years. My recovery from polio had pretty much peaked and my limp was minimal.

A Reminder and a Request

If you have the ability to receive e-mail, it will help us very, very much if you agree to receive the newsletter to your e-mail address. You will be able to read it on your computer, and you will still be able to print it and take it with you.

All you need to do is send your e-mail address to:

ranchoppsg@hotmail.com

Printing and mailing the newsletter costs about \$1.00 an issue. If you will agree to receive the newsletter by e-mail it costs nothing!

Meeting Notices

Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group

Saturday, April 26, 2014 - 2:00p.m. to 4:00 p.m. - Open - Sharing

Come and discuss your concerns, challenges, or triumphs. Ask questions. Provide support to others. Have a good time. Enjoy some delicious treats. Laugh ... or cry if the spirit moves you. Be a part of a caring and helpful group.

~ No May Meeting ~ We will join with the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County to hear from Dr. Perlman (see below)

Saturday, June 28, 2014 - 2:00p.m. to 4:00 p.m. - Annual Picnic

A map with directions will be in the next issue of the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group newsletter. Join us for fun, food, and games.

Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County

~ No April Meeting ~

Sunday, May 18, 2014 - 2:00p.m. to 4:00 p.m. - Dr. Susan Perlman

Annual research and treatment update presented by Dr. Susan Perlman. This is a joint meeting of the Rancho Los Amigos and Orange County support groups, held at Villa Park. A map with directions will be in the next issue of the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County newsletter.

Remember to send us your e-mail address!

It will really help!

Send it to: **ranchoppsg@hotmail.com**

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The Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group and the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County share a mailing list and publish newsletters on alternate months. All of our meetings are open to polio survivors, family, and friends.

Our meetings are relaxed, informal, and provide a supportive atmosphere for the exchange of ideas and concerns.

Visit your local support group.
You will be glad you did.