



Rancho Los Amigos

Post-Polio

Support Group

Newsletter - August 2014

Taking a Detour

By Richard Daggett

In June 1953 I celebrated my thirteenth birthday. I had planned to spend part of my summer with band practice and swimming lessons. At least that was the plan. Things didn't work out exactly as planned. July 17, 1953, all of my plans went out the window.

The first indication I had that something was wrong was waking with a stiff neck and back. It was not only stiff, but it really hurt too. Putting my clothes on was very, very uncomfortable.

I had a couple of severe headaches the day before but they both went away after an hour or so. I don't remember ever having a headache as a child and, in any case, I wasn't going to let these headaches spoil my summer fun. I'd run down the street and with every stride my brain felt like it wanted to leave my skull. It hurt, but I wasn't concerned. I'd occasionally hear friends and family members complain of headaches, and they always seemed to feel better later.

This back thing was different. I'd never known anything like this. I stayed in bed until mid-morning when my mother called my father at work. He came home and they took me to see our family doctor. The doctor did some tests, mostly to do with my reflexes. He said I should be taken to the Los Angeles County General Hospital.

We arrived at County General and entered the Communicable Disease Ward. This was a very old, red brick building on Zonal Avenue, just west of the main hospital building. Everything

(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 **RanchoPPSG@hotmail.com**

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)

inside seemed old too. I was put in a bed and they began giving me more tests. Every time a doctor came by he would ask me to try sitting up in bed without using my arms. This seemed to have some special significance. I did this about a dozen times and had no difficulty.

In the afternoon they did a spinal tap. They told me it was a test to see if I had polio. Everyone in the early 1950s had seen March of Dimes posters with iron lungs and kids with leg braces and crutches, but polio was not something I thought about much as a child. I didn't think any more about polio than I did about getting hit by a truck. I don't remember my parents making much of a fuss over it either.

The tap itself was very painful, but what hurt even more was trying to get in the knees-to-chin position that a tap required. They kept asking me to bend forward more but the pain in my back was really intense.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in a small alcove off a much larger room. I could see other children in the larger room. Although they were all in bed they didn't seem to be very sick. Some of them appeared to be playing games of some kind.

That night my legs began to ache, and shortly after midnight I started to have trouble sitting up. I needed to urinate and I could see a urinal on the nightstand next to my bed. I tried to reach for it but my arms wouldn't cooperate. With great effort I finally reached it but I was completely exhausted.

I wasn't sure how a person was supposed to feel if they had polio, but not being able to sit up told me I had it. I distinctly remember saying to myself, "Uh-oh. I think I have it." When my parents came to visit on Saturday I told them the same thing, "I think I have it." I said it almost apologetically. I knew my parents didn't want to hear this.

Sometime late Saturday afternoon they wheeled me into a small room where they started an IV. Then some people in surgical gowns wheeled me to another room that looked like a dentist's office. Here they performed a tracheotomy.

A tracheotomy — without an "s" — is the name of the surgical procedure to open an airway in your trachea, or "windpipe." A tracheostomy — with an "s" — is the incision left after the operation. I now have a tracheostomy, pronounced with a long "a." Those of us familiar with tracheostomies usually refer to them as "trachs," still pronounced with a long "a" and rhyming with cake.

(Continued on page 3)

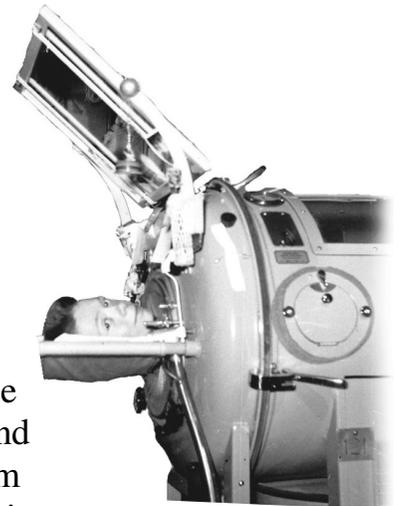
(Continued from page 2)

The operation was performed with a local anesthetic. I was wide awake and I could watch the doctors bending over me as they worked. The one who seemed to be the leader wore goggles over his glasses because, he said, “It keeps the patient’s breath from fogging my glasses up.” There must have been several people present who were unfamiliar with the operation because the doctor with the goggles gave a running commentary. Everybody in the room obviously knew what they were doing to me. Everybody in the room but me!

Up until this time I had moments of apprehension but I was never really frightened. Of course I wondered what was happening but, except for the spinal tap, nothing that had been done was very painful and everybody acted like things were going fine. Then the doctor doing the tracheotomy made one final cut and air started sucking in and out of the hole he made in my windpipe. I thought he must have done something wrong. I tried to ask them what had happened, but every time I tried to talk more air bubbled up out of the hole. Now I really was frightened.

When they finished the operation they put me in a tank respirator, more commonly known as an iron lung. As my head was sliding through the opening I vomited. I tried to apologize but the words wouldn’t come out. And blood seemed to be all over the place. My blood!

I either passed out or they gave me a shot of something to make me sleep, because the next thing I remember was waking up in a large room. There was a mirror over my head, and in the mirror I could see a row of large black bellows across the room. They were going up and down. I didn’t know much about respirators but I figured one of them must be making me breathe. I tried to figure which one it was by timing my breathing with the motion of each bellows. None of them seemed to match my breathing pattern. It wasn’t until later in the day, when my mirror was adjusted upward, that I realized those bellows were all attached to the underside of other respirators. I couldn’t see mine because it was beneath me.



I was in a Drinker-Collins “iron lung.” The Drinker machines were bluish green and had the bellows on the bottom of the respirator. These were the most common type of tank respirator in Los Angeles County. The Emerson “iron lung” was a pale yellow, almost sickly color and had the bellows on the end. The Emerson machines were less sophisticated and cheaper to manufacture. They were more common in other parts of the country. Both types made a low whooshing sound as they worked to keep us breathing.

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

An iron lung helps a person breathe by creating a rhythmic negative pressure within the tank. This negative pressure creates a partial vacuum and the patient's chest wall expands trying to fill this vacuum. When the chest expands the patient draws in air, mimicking natural breathing. The pressure and rate can vary for each patient. Those of us with significant paralysis of our breathing muscles often had additional air forced into our lungs through a tracheostomy. The tracheostomy can also be used to suction mucous from our lungs. I'm sure the tracheostomy saved my life.

After a few days I got used to the routine: two shots in the morning, one at noon, one at night, bath every day, and an enema every other day. Yech! I had blood taken for tests every third day, usually out of my leg or groin. Ouch! Some people might think that if a person can't move, then they can't feel either. Let me clear that up right now. Polio does not affect your senses. You are able to feel everything. If something looks like it would be painful, it probably *is* painful!

I couldn't swallow, so they inserted a tube through my nose and down into my stomach to feed me, and I still had the intravenous tube in my arm. Later they moved the IV to my leg. When they did this they performed what they called a "cut down," similar to what is now called a central line. They cut open a vein in my ankle and inserted the IV tube directly into the vein. That was one of the things that really hurt, both when it was opened and again when it was closed. I assume they must have used some local anesthetic but it sure didn't feel like it.

My mother drove to the hospital to visit almost every afternoon and both parents came in the evening. I'm sure it was a difficult time for them. I was their youngest child, and I was very, very ill with bulbospinal polio, the most severe form of this disease. I learned later that, in addition to polio, I had a life-threatening case of pneumonia.

It was probably more difficult for all the parents. Imagine entering a room filled with these huge metal tanks. The tanks are making their whooshing sound. All you can see are heads sticking out one end of each tank and you know that one of these heads belongs to your child.

I've heard from many polio survivors who felt isolated from their families while in the hospital. They state that their parents were not allowed to visit them for several weeks. Even when they could, they would be kept separated, either behind a glass partition or outside the building completely, only able to wave to their child through a window. Many were visited only on Sundays or some other rare occasion.

This was not the case at Los Angeles County General Hospital. As I relate above, my parents

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

were allowed to visit me twice a day, with restrictions on actual physical contact. When I was transferred to Rancho Los Amigos we had regular visiting hours. These were Saturday and Sunday afternoons and evenings, and Wednesday evenings. Parents could visit their children on any day and at any reasonable time. Perhaps the doctors and hospital administrators in Los Angeles County had a more enlightened perspective than those in other parts of the Country.

My father began a daily journal of the events surrounding my illness and hospitalization. He never mentioned it, and I didn't know about it until after his death when I was going through his papers. I believe this journal was his way of coping with the strain and sadness he and my mother must have endured.

Here are some excerpts from the first few entries:

Friday, July 17: Dr. Hershey examined him and gave us an order to take him to the CD building at the General Hospital. Arrived about 11:30 a.m. They asked us a lot of questions and gave Richard an examination. He said he felt "Pretty good," The doctor told us he had no muscular weakness at that time.

Saturday, July 18: Arrived at the hospital at 2 p.m. Richard was suffering some discomfort and said, "I have it", meaning polio. He showed us the difficulty he had moving his arms. We returned home somewhat apprehensive. At 9 p.m. Dr. Miller called and said Richard developed some difficulty breathing and they were planning to put him in an Iron Lung later in the evening. He called again about 11:30 and suggested we come there. We went immediately. We couldn't see the doctor until 2:15 a.m. He explained they put Richard in the Lung as a precaution and to save his strength. We went home feeling pretty low.

Sunday, July 19: Called the hospital at 9 a.m. The nurse said Richard had a quiet night and that we could see him. We went right over and visited with him for 10 minutes. He seemed in good spirits, under the circumstances, and was comfortable. Talked to one of the Drs. and he explained some things about polio to us. As long as the patient has a fever it is still "working". After that they can determine the extent of nerve damage. There is nothing to do but wait for two or three days for the answer. They will be anxious days for us. Went to the hospital again in the evening. Richard is a very sick boy.

Monday, July 20: I left work at noon. Went home for lunch and we went to the hospital. The nurse was working on Richard when we saw him. The Dr. said he had developed pneumonia. Still a very sick boy. We returned to the hospital at 7 p.m.. We were rewarded with the first hopeful sign. Richard seemed in good spirits and the nurse said his temperature was down a

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

little. We came home clinging to that slim thread of hope.

Tuesday, July 21: Came home for lunch and went to the hospital. The nurse was working on Richard so we had to wait in the hall a few minutes before we could see him. He is very sick but the Dr. said his fever is slightly lower. He also told us that Richard has a better than even chance to pull through. Returned to the hospital at 7 p.m. Richard was asleep when we went in but the nurse awakened him. He seemed glad to see us. I asked him if he was discouraged and he shook his head to indicate a definite “NO!” That spirit can’t lose and I’m real sure he will win.

I treasure this journal. It is important historically, but even more important to me is the written record of my parents’ thoughts and concerns.

Everyone had to wear gowns and a few people wore masks when they were on the patient units in the Communicable Disease Ward. Men, who I assumed were doctors, would often stop by my respirator. They would talk *about* me, but never *to* me. It was almost like I was a bug in a petri dish. This heightened my sense of apprehension. Were they preparing to do some different tests? Would they be painful?

The nights were the worst times. They kept some of the lights on and there was always someone who needed attention. I didn’t want to sleep anyway because, when I did sleep, a little bit of the air being forced into my lungs by the respirator would leak out my nostrils. When I awoke, aerated mucous covered part of my face. This was very disturbing to me. Try to imagine lying on your back. You have the worst “cold” you can envision. Now imagine that while you are sleeping you are continuously and unconsciously blowing your nose. And, you are blowing your nose without even using a tissue. Yech! I don’t remember other patients mentioning this but I’m guessing there must have been others with this problem. It was caused by the almost complete paralysis of my breathing and swallowing muscles. Any slight control I had while awake disappeared when I slept. I had this problem for almost two weeks.

I was very naïve. I had no real understanding of how serious my condition was. Oh, I knew that I was completely paralyzed, but the long-term impact did not sink in. My greatest concern was that I might miss the first day of school. Part of this may have been because my only direct knowledge of polio was through two neighborhood friends. The brothers both had polio in 1948. They were in the hospital for about three weeks and then reappeared without any visible aftereffects.

As I lay motionless and on life support I thought about starting school in September. After a

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

couple of weeks I realized I wasn't going to suddenly jump up and start walking, but I still thought I'd leave the hospital before school began. I could visualize going back to school on crutches or maybe a slight limp. In a kind of demented way this appealed to me. I figured all the pretty girls would fawn over me. And, when you are a thirteen year old boy, all girls are pretty.

Perhaps a person's mind tries to protect itself from reality. Or, perhaps my mind was just overly dense. Before polio I bit my fingernails. I tried to break the habit but not very successfully. In the iron lung I couldn't bring my fingers to my mouth. After a few days I could tell my nails were longer. I mentioned this to my parents and my father said he'd buy me a nail clipper and file if I continued to let them grow.

Here I was, encased in a large, 800 pound metal cylinder with just my head sticking out. I couldn't move, breathe, or swallow. But when my father offered to buy me my own personal nail clipper I felt as if I'd just won the lottery.

© Copyright 2014 by Richard Lloyd Daggett

All rights reserved. No parts may be used in other newsletters, posted online, reproduced or transmitted in any form without prior written permission.

Please submit your request to **RanchoPPSG@hotmail.com** or mail to:
RanchoPPSG, 12720 La Reina Avenue, Downey CA 90242

NOTE: This is another in our series of first person accounts relating early polio experiences. Many of our readers have written to express their interest in these first person stories. The story in this issue is an excerpt from Richard Daggett's autobiography, *Not Just Polio: My Life Story*. The book is available from Barnes & Noble, Amazon, and most online book sellers. You can also contact the author directly at: **info@polioassociation.org**

Life is a roller coaster. Enjoy the ride.

There was an appeal for donations in the last newsletter. It is important to have the funds necessary to continue. We take pride when we can offer timely and informative articles to our readers. Some readers have sent donations in the last year. These are greatly appreciated.

There are two ways you can help. The first, of course, is to assist financially. Mail your donation to Support Groups' Newsletters at 12720 La Reina Avenue, Downey, CA 90242. Make your check out to PSA—Support Groups, and write newsletters in the memo area of the check. The Rancho Los Amigos group publishes on even numbered months and the Orange County group publishes on the odd numbered months. All donations are shared equally.

The second way you can help is to accept the newsletters through your e-mail. Many of you have agreed to this time and money saving step. You will be able to read the newsletters on your computer, and you will still be able to print them and take them with you. Just send your e-mail address to: ranchoppsg@hotmail.com and write e-mail newsletter in the subject line and your name in the message area.

Please remember, no reader will be removed from the mailing list if you do not have e-mail! It would be helpful, however, if you could send us a brief note by regular mail telling us you want to continue receiving the newsletters through the mail. Thank you for your support.

Support Group Meetings

Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group:

Saturday, August 23, 2014 - Helpful Gadgets and Tips

Saturday, September 27, 2014 - Historic Videos; some scary, some humorous

Contact Diane at 562-861-8128 or Richard at 562-862-4508

Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County:

Saturday, September 9, 2014 - Bracing

Saturday, November 8, 2014 - HICAP (Health Insurance Counseling & Advocacy Program)

Contact Marilyn at 714-839-3121

Both support groups meet from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Both groups encourage you to bring your family and friends.