

The Brief History of an "Old Polio" - Me!

From the 1950 Sydney Epidemic

(Originally written in 2004 and updated in 2013)

Although this is my story, it is an approximate mirror of many hundreds, or even thousands, of others who have had to battle the damage left to us by Polio.

For me, it began in the early part of 1950 when I started getting severe pains through my chest. These steadily increased and spread through to my neck and back – I was just 15.

When the pain was obviously getting worse and spreading further through my body the local GP was called. He went over me, gently bending limbs and neck this way and that checking reactions for pain and stiffness.

He left me to talk privately with my mother and, after what seemed an age, came and said to me: "Stuart, your mum didn't want me to tell you, but I feel you should know what you have and what you are in for . . . you have all the symptoms of Polio. I have called for an ambulance to transfer you to The Prince of Wales Hospital – this is where all Polio patients are being treated – and have informed the Health Authorities."

He then went on to explain the seriousness of Polio and the procedures that would follow.

I was grateful for his honesty, for he was right. I was a kid who would have blown his stack and become most difficult to handle if they had tried to hide the facts from me. In fact, I believe it is a mistake to underestimate the intelligence and resilience of young minds to comprehend and cope better with problems once they know the facts.

Of course, we all "knew" of a disease called Polio . . . used to call it Infantile Paralysis, didn't they? That was a disease people who lived in dirty areas caught. Wasn't it? Well, I was to learn the truth about that.

My arrival at the "Wales" was a whirl – whisked down corridors and into a private room (not because I was special, but apparently usual procedure for testing and initial monitoring to see if I was to need breathing assistance).

Even so, I had noted that there were beds head to foot right down one side of all the corridors and learned that there was (if memory serves me right) about 360 of us Polio patients there at that time. To try and keep the outbreak isolated they brought in extra beds and placed them wherever they would fit. 1950 was Sydney's last big Polio epidemic. I believe there was one more smaller outbreak the following year and then the Salk vaccine came along and virtually wiped it out.

I have always had, even then, a quite logical and analytical mind, and despite my fears of what the outcome would be for me, I was still intrigued, and amused, at some of the things they did.

The normal mattress had been removed and wooden planks covered the base. On this was a hard mattress about 1-2 inches thick. I was spread-eagled on this – legs out, arms out - and then they proceeded to place what I called "draft stoppers" (long sausage-shaped bags packed tightly with sand) along either side of my legs and arms and around my neck. When I asked what they were for I was told "they were to help stop my limbs from being bent by the muscle contractions". I was amazed and just laughed (very briefly, as this caused absolutely enormous pain in my chest).

They were not impressed at the cheek of a 15-year-old asking if they were mad! After all, all I had to do was move my head, leg or arm slightly and the “sausage” moved with it.

Perhaps I was not being fair – maybe they were trying to generate hope in an atmosphere that must have been as despairing and devastating to the medical staff knowing that, not only was there little they could do to alleviate the suffering of so many young victims who, at best, would be crippled for life – or not make it at all. The usual outcome was death or paralysis.

I lay on that bed looking out of a huge window across Little Bay to blue sky and bright ocean and wondered what the future held.

There was constant noise – the worst, and most mind blowing, were the screams, 24/7, of 100's of children; the majority much younger than I, who did not understand what was happening, other than that their little bodies felt like they were being ripped apart in one long continuous nightmare. No words can describe this pain. Then there was the other constant noise, that of the respirators and iron lungs in the adjoining rooms that sounded like harsh, heavy, in-out breathing – which it was; and because there was more than one machine going, the sounds seemed out of sync. All-in-all, a very dispiriting environment.

While all this was registering in my mind I was trying to cope with my own pain and fears.

As I said before, no words can describe the pain. It was horrendous and constant. The only way I found to keep my mind from collapsing in despair was to keep moving my body slightly – very slight movement was all that was achievable because of the pain and stiffness – this would make the pain knife through my chest and back and then, as I stopped moving, it appeared to give a huge feeling of relief – if only for a brief moment until the normal agony re-exerted itself and you knew that the reprieve was only in the mind.



A day or so later I was in for another “first”. I made the mistake of saying “no” when the nurse asked had I been to the toilet. You guessed it! I learned what an enema was! I didn’t make that mistake again! No pain in the butt could override the pain in the rest of me, anyway.

I was kept in the “Wales” for about 6 weeks. Then, after much pressure from me through mum, to my GP, to the hospital, to the health authorities, it was agreed that, as I was now unlikely to require a respirator, I could just as well be nursed at home, so long as my GP was prepared to call on me every day (which he did for the next 5-6 months). This would free up a much needed bed for someone else. (I might add that there were nowhere near enough respirators to go around – I believe they used to keep some breathing by hand-pumping until a machine became vacant - many simply did not make it.)

Another little aside at this point was the odd behaviour of the health department. As soon as the ambulance had taken me away they moved in and swabbed and fumigated our already spotless home, making mum feel like a dirty housewife. The strange thing was that they had no objections to me being brought back by ambulance and set up there only about 6 weeks later.

I don’t remember how long it was before the pain began to diminish; probably several months as, by

that time, my right leg had withered considerably (by 4" in diameter) and my back and neck never felt right (time would show the damage done to both). I guess the pain diminished as the shrinkage ceased.

My GP did drop in at some time every day and would check me over for stiffness, etc, and then just sit and talk. Because of his no-fuss "adult" approach to discussing the problems I would face, I'm sure he helped to keep me sane, especially through the mind-numbing months of pain.

When I eventually got back on my feet I had one leg much thinner than the other and walked with a slight limp. It was arranged for me to go back to the "Wales" for physiotherapy and, one day, I duly reported for this.

The first thing they did was put me in a neck-brace and "hang" me from an overhead hook by jacking up the hook until my weight came off the chair. There I hung for some time. Supposedly this would help straighten the spine. Fair enough. Then I was placed in a chair and weights placed over my right ankle and told to raise the leg 10 times. I got it up one and a half. When they insisted on 10 times my natural pig-headed nature kicked in! I told them "that all they were going to do was harden the muscles up and they would never come back!"

I headed for the front door where the hospital administrator (a tall guy who tended to look down his nose at everyone) told me that "if I walked out that door, don't come back". This pig-headed 16-year-old promptly told him "I was not coming back to have him cripple me" and limped away to the bus-stop.

I lived at Coogee Bay in Sydney; only a block back from the beach. Coogee Bay is a small bay, with 2 headlands. On one headland there was a private set of baths (Giles) and on the other the Surf Life Saving Club and sea baths. Every day I used to go down and slip into the water at one point and swim (plod) along to the other point. No set pace or stroke – just get there. I preferred to be out in the flat water as I found the surf to exhausting. Having only arrived in Sydney from the country a couple of months prior to getting Polio, I was oblivious to the fact that I was literally swimming with sharks that were a constant in that part of the bay. Oh, well! I had survived everything else so I carried on!

After nine months of this the right leg had come back from 4 inches wasted to only a quarter-inch. When my GP reported this to the hospital they replied "he could not have had polio".

Accidentally, or by divine guidance (seeing I had survived everything as well as the sharks), I had practised something similar to that which would be done today with someone in the same position – taken to the water; a natural hydrotherapy pool.

However, this was not the end of suffering, only the beginning.

I continued to have sudden, and massive, pain attacks in the chest. The pain would be so intense that I could not breathe and after a period of holding my breath would start to pass out. At this point of sliding into "sleep" the pain would suddenly reduce and I would start breathing again. For a number of years I thought that one of these attacks would be the last. Doctors could not tell me what they were, only that they were not heart as they were "slightly" off centre for heart.

Eventually I accepted them as part of life and got on with living. It was not until I was 33 that it happened one day in a doctor's surgery (much to the disquiet of his other waiting patients when I folded up on the waiting-room floor). Anyway, the GP tracked the pain around the rib-cage to the lower neck. He then had my entire back x-rayed and told me there was nothing he could do for me. He stated that I had osteoarthritis right through me and that I should expect to be in a nursing home within a couple of years. He said "I'm sorry, but you are an old man young". I never fully understood this statement until the mid 1980's. However, what looked like osteoarthritis was actually the damage done by the polio.

Once I knew what the pain was, and where it was coming from, I was able to manage it. When I would feel the first onset twinges of pain, I simply laid back in a lounge and moved my neck around gently until whatever was pinching let go. It worked – most of the time!

Still, that was only part of it. At work pain used to spread out through my neck and shoulders until I could no longer stand it and had to change from the work I did.

It was at this time I was introduced to a chiropractor who explained that his was a university degree from the USA where chiropractors were not frowned upon as quacks.

Anyway, he looked me over and showed me how my spine was sort of S-shaped and needed straightening. He worked on me for a few months, but I finished up in more pain than I started with, so I quit.

It became obvious to me that all he was doing was similar to pushing a finger into a football – release the pressure and it springs back.

Later, I met up with another old friend who had been studying as an osteopath (what I call a specialist chiropractor). Well, nothing ventured, etc. In one night on his kitchen table, I got more relief than I had received in nearly 20 years. The difference was obvious – instead of just pushing it back, he worked on the muscles and loosened them up until they were more receptive and things stayed in place for days at a time; the period getting longer after each session.

He arranged for me to see his tutor who practiced much closer to where I lived. Unfortunately, the tutor was not as good as the student, but was adequate and got the job done.

After nearly 12 months he had straightened my back and eliminated the limp altogether. However, he could not undo the damage that the polio had done and I continued to suffer enormous pain in my neck, back and muscles when trying to work.

At this time I heard of a Dr Skyrme Rees, a former London surgeon who had come to Australia as a GP to get his new method of cutting nerve ends, without opening the spine, recognised. By the time I met him, he had quit being a GP and was well ensconced as a specialist in Macquarie Street, Sydney.

I took the chance and had him do a series of operations down my back. Ostensibly, he cut the nerve ends on both sides of my spine from the neck to the lumbar.

Although this did not get rid of all my problems, I do believe it was responsible for me being able to carry on working and enjoying sport for most of my life. I could feel things grating and catching as I turned my head, but did not feel pain. (His methods were not recognised by the government, so I had to foot the bill for the lot. As far as I know, his method is still not recognised, even though the government has reaped untold millions in taxes from the people he put back in the work force.)

I moved west in 1974 to change my lifestyle and type of work again to adjust to the deteriorating changes that continued to go on within my body.

When asked what my body feels like, I have always described it this way: Normal feeling – bruised and battered all over by one baseball bat; Bad day – the same but with 2 baseball bats!

I sought out a local GP, Michael Chin, who proved to be my lifeline for the next 28-odd years. He saved me time and again with his uncanny ability with the use of cortisone – he never missed the spot. After initially taking x-rays, he said there was little he could do other than help me when the pain became too great. He did that and more. Mike became to me GP, friend and lifeline until he was taken by cancer. I know it is often said about many, but Mike Chin did deserve better.

I always knew that when I over-did something that upset the balance (which was frequently, as I was rather aggressive with sport), Mike would be there to rescue me.

It was around the mid-80's (I think) that reports started appearing stating that polio "was coming back at old polio's". My reply was "rubbish, it has never gone away; I have been fighting it all my life!"

In studying it all I realised that, because I had not finished in callipers or a wheelchair, and had got myself back to a stage where I could enjoy some sports, I was not feeling the effects the same as those who were more incapacitated. From what I can see, age can start the "shrinkage" process off again. (No doubt there is a medical term for this.) Hence, those in wheelchairs were really starting to suffer, and many have since died from the stress combined with age.

I have also learned what that GP meant long ago when he said "you are an old man young". Even if I did prove him wrong about the nursing home!

The most difficult effect to cope with is the constant fatigue. You want to lie down and sleep. However, when you lie down, the brain becomes alert and you become wide awake. I have always assumed that this was due to the increased release of oxygen to the brain once the load is taken off the muscles; a vicious circle, with a devastating effect on the ability to sleep. One specialist at Sir Charles Gardner, who interviewed me during their research into Post Polio problems during the 1980s, wrote that "Stuart has used sport and work all his life to combat the effects of fatigue caused by Post Polio". I must admit to being amazed at his insight and, on reflection, had to agree with his finding, for there was nothing like an adrenalin rush to clear the head. (Maybe that is why I was so aggressive at sport.)

Another effect of this lack of oxygen is a narrowing of the nasal passage due to swelling. Sudden movement, or an adrenalin rush can immediately open the airways for a brief period. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a way of turning this adrenalin rush into a constant.

I know it is not over yet. Now, in my later years I am probably facing a more difficult time. I have just had a taste of it. A break-down of an over-stressed nerve that energised every inflamed muscle and nerve to the point that I felt I was back in that Polio ward all those years ago. Unconsciously (at first) I found myself doing the same thing – moving my body to increase the pain so that I felt a sudden surge of relief as I eased back . . . until the main pain exerted itself yet again.

I have tried many of the so-called anti-inflammatory drugs over the years, but the only one that worked well, Vioxx, was taken off the market some years ago as some claimed it caused heart attacks and sued the company; didn't matter about the thousands of us who benefited.

Where we go from here is yet to be determined – more trial and error.

One thing that needs to be emphasised here is the absolute necessity for immunisation to continue. Not just for Polio, but all the other viruses that can wreak such havoc in a community.

I, and all those who have gone through one of these horrendous epidemics, shudder when we see just how thin the safety line is becoming as more and more refuse vaccination for this or that.

If they could see into my mind and hear the screams of those 360-odd children (not to mention the ones who had to scream in silence as they could not breathe alone), they would rush to have their children immunised, for it is a sound carried for life . . . never forgotten.

I also believe that all immunisation should be made compulsory by government law. This way when, for some inexplicit reason, a child dies from immunisation causes, the parents have someone to blame and not have to take it on their own shoulders. This may be small comfort to them, but still better to blame a government than destroy themselves with the feeling of guilt.

I have written this because so few today have ever seen, or gone through, one of these epidemics. They cannot envisage the destruction of whole families. The cracks are showing, and unless action is taken to make immunisation law, it is not a matter of if . . . but how soon one of these scourges comes in through the crack.

They talk about “eradication”, but I do not believe something that comes from nature can be eradicated . . . just suppressed and controlled . . . by immunisation.



A boy locked in and “Iron Lung” - the only way he can breath is have the machine breath for him.



A common result for children who had Polio - unable to walk without calipers!