

MY POLIO EXPERIENCE: HELEN ROSE GILLAN

"I can't move", I called my mother. She 'phoned the doctor. He moved my arms and legs despite my cries. It was November 1952. I had just turned 12. An ambulance took me to Fairfield Hospital and I was put into a bed. I asked for a bed-pan but was told not to be lazy. I had to walk down a long corridor to the bathroom. Back in bed, a nurse came with an enormous needle. She told me it would not hurt. The lumbar puncture without any local anaesthetic made me nearly jump out of bed in agony. A doctor diagnosed my condition. It was poliomyelitis. I was put in a ward with other children and remember feeling sorry for the babies. Then I was fully immobilised in a splint sometimes called a 'Double Thomas'. I was allowed no visitors for a while.

My parents were Christian missionaries in Vanuatu (then called The New Hebrides). I was born and spent my early childhood in these tropical islands. When we came to Melbourne in 1952, there was no vaccine for polio, and I had no immunity at all. My brother called all the family to pray for me. I knew that the Lord Jesus Christ would care for me in this crisis. I have proved Jesus faithful all through my life.

I was discharged from Fairfield Hospital on Christmas Day. I clearly remember my feelings during the next year. My family were marvellous. My sister began training as a Kindergarten Teacher. My brother was still at school. My wonderful father was the minister at a suburban Presbyterian church. My beloved mother was my nurse. They were all very kind. But I was frightened of the doctors. Many doctors examined me and stared at my naked body. They said I had to stay in the splint all the time. My father put a wooden board under my mattress to keep me flat. Sometimes, I was wheeled in a flat 'pram'. I dreaded being strapped and bandaged onto the splint. I thought the occasional visits of a physiotherapist were silly. One made me sit up and put a marble under one buttock to straighten my back. There was no massage or hydro-therapy or exercise. I developed severe scoliosis in my spine. One bright spot was the correspondence school. I enjoyed learning, even though it was very difficult to write with my arms splinted. I had a board on my bed that could hold a piece of paper or book. I had a little crystal set wireless and could tune in at a regular time every day to talk to my teacher.

The next year, I rode a bicycle to a local girls' school. My mother wrote a letter to explain that I was recovering from poliomyelitis. But that made no difference. I found it very difficult to join in the everyday activities of school life. Gymnasium lessons were a nightmare. The teacher refused to listen to me and made me do everything the other girls did. When I could not do things, she punished me. I enjoyed learning and usually came top in exams. This slightly boosted my sagging self-esteem. I enjoyed singing and playing the piano. Somehow, I passed the Year 7 music exam. During Year 12, there were two professional choices for me: teacher or nurse. I knew I did not want to be a nurse!! I was not strong enough for university. So I applied to train as a Primary Teacher. The person conducting the medical examination turned me down and told me that I would be a cripple by the time I was 40. But, perhaps because teachers were needed, I was accepted by the education Department and began training. Here. The sports staff were much more understanding. I enjoyed College. I had 20 years teaching experience and was promoted to a very responsible position. But by the time I was 40, I did have to retire. I received the Invalid Pension.

I found it very frustrating to have an active mind in a permanently disabled body. I trained as a Special Education Teacher but was not strong enough to work with disabled children. I enrolled in a post-graduate programme at Latrobe University. I graduated Bachelor of Education, Master of Education, Doctor of Education. I developed a new approach to help children learn to read. My speciality was literacy through literature, learning to read with contemporary Australian quality children's literature. I published a book based on my doctoral dissertation, and other publication. I have always enjoyed leading church activities such as Sunday School teacher, Bible Study teacher, Choir leader, and Pipe-organist.

After I turned 40, my mobility decreased dramatically. I developed arthritis, osteoporosis, and the terrible trio of chronic fatigue, pain and weakness. Now I am 63 years old but feel about 83. I cannot use public transport or mix in crowds because the slightest accident causes fractures in my

spine. I cannot sing or play the piano or pipe-organ. I can still drive my own car short distances, to maintain some measure of independence. For the last 20 years, I have been a carer for my disabled sister. We now live in a retirement village where we can have support as required. Within the village, there are always friends to visit and activities to join in, without leaving home. I do not feel house-bound. I really appreciate the Polio support Network. The first polio gathering I attended was at Doncaster, during the 1970s I think. It was most encouraging to discover that I wasn't the only one with these physical problems. One of the polio survivors suggested using a kitchen timer to pace myself with housework, then stop and rest, never push on when I know I should stop. It is not always possible to do this, but it is wise advice. I also try to sleep for one hour after lunch every day. I use a computer to continue my professional writing. I have a very supporting GP. I look forward to receiving the magazines for ParaQuad especially Polio Perspectives. I like reading personal stories of other polio survivors, and professional research findings. The positive trio of Faith in God, support from family, friends and Polio providers, and a steady source of ideas to stimulate my creative writing, make life worthwhile. I am healthy, happy and praising the Lord.