

## VAL HEATH'S POLIO STORY

My first memory – Pain, my mother in tears and I was in an ambulance – alone. I was being taken away. I was sick and scared. Then on a trolley looking at ceiling and lights and I was taken – I didn't know where and I was alone. The year was 1937 – I was three years old and I had polio!

I was at Fairfield Hospital and after six weeks quarantine was moved to Hampton Rehabilitation. Nursing in those days was bad, no tenderness, very hard and sometimes cruel. Gradually, I got used to lying in bed on my back. I remember singing, I loved music. I laughed a lot too and had school lessons as I got older. Most other patients were in splints, strapped into iron frames, but my parents chose a new treatment from Sister Kenny who went to America to be recognised, as she had little support from Australian doctors. I remember her as a large lady dressed in black and always wearing a big black hat. Doctors told my parents nothing more could be done. I was seven years old and dying through lack of nourishment. They were told I would never sit up without help, never walk or never have a child. So they took me home to die.

A nurse from Hampton left to give Sister Kenny treatment to a few Polios privately and she chose me to be her patient. So there I was, home at last after four years. I left as a toddler, came back a girl of seven, a stranger to my home and parents. I was an only child and I was lonely and missing the company of other children. So I started the Sister Kenny treatment. Her idea was to awaken muscles polio had left. The price paid was 5 shillings for four visits a week. Was I in for a shock. Naked on the kitchen table, I was rubbed over with fish oil then slapped with cabbage leaves, then into a bath and hosed with cold water. I thought they all hated me as I don't remember anything being explained. Months passed and I could stand. The torture method had worked. My first steps were taken outside on a cold winter morning, walking in sand to strengthen my feet.

During this time, as my parents felt I was too frail to cope with a State school, I was taught privately by a woman who had a kindergarten at her home, so from ages 8 to 14, I went each afternoon on my specially built three-wheeled tricycle to her home. I was always embarrassed attending a "kinder" at 8-½ years old. Those years were HELL, but she taught me up to Grade 6. I have very few happy childhood memories. At 14 years, I went to school for the first time and did very well at a Business Course.

At 16, I had my first office job. I was fit and mobile by then – no calipers or sticks. As my spine was crooked, to try to keep it as straight as possible, I wore a cast similar to plaster and laced up the front with leather (every time I breathed, it squeaked, much to my embarrassment). The making of the corset was done by hanging me by a strap under my chin, 'till my toes were touching the floor, my hands on the shoulders of a nurse to steady me. Plaster was then wrapped over my whole body and when it was set, it was cut down the front with an electric saw. That gave the shape of my body and from that was made the type of corset I wore everyday. It was very hot in summer and painfully uncomfortable.

I have few happy memories of childhood and I was lonely most of the time. I was shy and as not having a proper school life, I had no opportunity of mixing or making friends. I felt inferior to others, as my mother always told me no-one would want me as I was crippled and crooked.

January 1953 – I attended Royal Melbourne Hospital to have my spine straightened, then a bone graft to keep it straight. Again, hung by my neck under my chin, then plaster from knees over my body and arms to my elbows. Such a terrible feeling – totally tied up. I strained so hard to get out, I cracked the cast three times. I felt I was going mad and to this day, I can't bear to be restricted. When the plaster set in a few days, a cut was made in the side into which was put a screw type attachment. Every two days that was manipulated, which stretched my body and also twisted it sideways, just like a torture rack of the dark ages. I lay on a canvas stretcher placed on the bed – it had a hole for my bottom and

a bedpan would be placed underneath. I lost all dignity, could move my arms very little and could do nothing for myself. The pain was so bad, the nurses would come to me and cry with me, it was bad for them too. They were my age (19) and we had become as friends.

Apart from the bad bits, I was happy there. I hadn't mixed much with my age group and nurses shared their lives with me – the trouble they got into at work, their boyfriends etc. After three months of pain in the "torture rack", I had been stretched 6 inches and straightened as well, so it was time for the first of two operations. Bone was taken from my leg and grafted into one side of my spine. Then three weeks later, bone from the other leg was grafted into the other side. This was done while in full plaster with a hole cut in the back for doctors to work, with Dr. Eric Price leading a team of six. After eight weeks of morphine and penicillin, the hole was closed and then four months of waiting for the bone graft to come together. Well time passed and I was sent home, six inches taller and no hump on my back. I had spent 11 months of my 19<sup>th</sup> year in hospital. It took two years to lose the six inches and the hump came back as well, but without the operations, I would not have been able to sit up eventually. In six months I was back at work as receptionist/telephonist.

My 21<sup>st</sup> birthday was getting close. My parents told me because I was crippled and crooked, no man would marry me so they decided to give a large party in a reception house. Also as I would never have had an engagement ring, they gave me a small sapphire and diamond ring. One week before the party I was at work, walked into reception to attend to a client, slipped in spilt polish left by a cleaner and broke my leg. So back into hospital and came home a day before the party with my leg in plaster, so I went to the party in an ambulance and it took me home again. My mother told me that day the doctors had told her I couldn't live to 40. I proved that wrong!

When my leg healed, I went back to work, but after a short time, the whole company moved too far away for me to travel, so I gained employment as Office Manager for the Printing Company who had bought the building. Within three years, I had married my boss. Polio wasn't a problem, all I needed was a built up shoe and surgical corset. I was OK for many years. 1962 – Our beautiful baby girl was born. Again the doctors thought I or baby or both would die. I had a problem free pregnancy and birth. She was a perfect baby.

So years passed. My polio didn't hinder me much but as I reached 40 years of age, I began to feel tired and the pain in my muscles started. I was working a lot in the office of a large Church of which we were members. I typed manuscripts for books the Head Minister had published. As well as 'phone counseling, I was Registrar of an Adult Education School in the Church and I did all the confidential work with the Head Minister. I was also in the planning of large dinners for 1,000 people, given by the Church. I enjoyed being able to do the work, as all my life I had felt a misfit – an outsider and this showed I was able to be of use to others. As well as all this, we loved to give dinner parties. I was a good cook and enjoyed those times. One year, I kept a diary and in looking back, I had an average of one dinner a week, which meant some weeks two or three. No wonder I got tired.

I had many bad falls. Once I broke my knee in Myer at Southland. After that, I used a walking stick and then, when I went shopping, I used a four-wheeled shopping jeep. I have up 'till now had 16 broken bones as well as many bad falls which put me out of action for a while.

1983 - My husband died very suddenly, so that was the end of the best part of my life. Now here I was for the first time in my life completely alone. If only people knew the turmoil when the one you love dies. Our daughter, who was 21, had been addicted to heroin etc. for six years, so decisions had to be made alone – depression, fear, unreality, with dependence on medical help. My health went. I was sick for more than a year and my doctor visited weekly. I lost 17 lbs. in weight. I couldn't think, I couldn't eat. I had bad falls which put me in hospital a few times in that year. My daughter would come and go, I didn't see much of her and didn't know where she was.

Within a year, my health and body had deteriorated so much, my GP suggested I visit the Polio Clinic. Dear Dr. Murphy and the physio's were there to help me. They gave me elbow crutches because my right leg had become so crooked, they thought it could snap at the knee. I also had a motor-chair within six weeks. So came to learn of P.P.S. I had lived with stress for many years with my daughter's problem and now the shock of the death of my husband had been too much. The next years were hard. I was getting weaker and knew if I got sick I had no-one to take care of me. I was getting Meals-on-Wheels, so I was eating better. I had to keep strong.

1986 – I moved to a retirement village. I had a battle to get in, because of my disability. The Directors thought I would be a nuisance, but after four months of meeting with the Board of Directors, I won. Nothing ever seems to come easy for me. I lived very happily there for 15 years. I had been there for six months, when again another broken leg, so I was away four months. On arriving back home to my unit, I was greeted by an offer of a wheel-chair accessible unit, built to my planning. Four years later, I married a man from the village and I left my special unit to live with him.

My second marriage was like a nightmare. My health and mobility was worse and I needed to use the motor-chair more. January 1991 – My daughter died from an overdose of drugs. She was 29 years old. To lose a child is such a black time, words can never express the feeling until one has been there. I have no siblings or relatives and am completely alone.

1992 – I left my husband and moved again, then collapsed. The stress over the last years was too much. I had lost a husband, my home, moved four times in five years, lost my daughter, my health and mobility. Then a broken marriage. All too much for a person to bear. I regularly attended the Polio Clinic and it was found my breathing was not good. P.P.S. had reached my lungs, which were weakening and I knew the time was coming when I would need a ventilator. I fought against it but was getting so tired. Eventually I gave in and spent three weeks in hospital getting used to sleeping and breathing with a ventilator (not a C-PAP machine). This takes over my breathing and breathes for me to rest my lungs, so I can breathe unaided during the day. When lying down, I can't be without it. I now need oxygen through it as well, in fact, I now have oxygen 24/7. All that started 11 years ago. I haven't walked for many years now. I could still transfer up to 4 years ago, but can't even do that now.

Four years ago I broke my leg again and much to my surprise I didn't recover. I have always fought back, but this time it was too much for my weak arms and legs. My spine is "sponging" (sinking) and my body is twisting as well. I have lost the ability to do a lot of things I used to do. My arms have gone and I can't stand. My body is fast deteriorating now and my doctors have told me I may need to be in bed most of the day, but that hasn't yet happened. I am now in a High Level Care Nursing Home. I never expected to get this bad, so it's just as well I didn't know what was in the future for me.

I bring your attention to the column written by Michael Judson (Polio Perspectives, Autumn 2005, with reference to the book "Polio Paradox"). Sure it's harrowing, but after living 70 years with polio, that wasn't a problem. I now own my copy, which has taught me so much and recommend it to all Polios.