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PAULINE'S POLIO STORY

In July 1949 when I contracted Polio, I was 6 years and 8 months old. I was in Grade 2 and during lunch time I felt very tired and could not join in the skippy and hopscotch. I remember sitting down in the undercover area and also the slow journey home.

My mother rang our family doctor Dr .Warwick Rosenthal and he came to our house. I remember being in the front bedroom which was only ever used for visitors. He took my temperature and the next thing I was in Bendigo Base Hospital Watson Ward Infectious Diseases. Watson Ward which has now been demolished had been the section where soldiers had been after the war. There were pencil drawings on the wall. I did not see my parents for 3 weeks and my two brothers for 19 months .My eldest brother was excluded from school for 3 weeks.

The whole time I was in hospital my bed was on a veranda, initially on an outside veranda which was hot in Summer and freezing in Winter. There were canvas blinds which were rolled down at night and then up in the morning. Our beds faced a brick wall. We had to lie on our backs with a fracture board under the mattress. The really scary bit was the spiders. BIG BLACK SPIDERS which used to fall at regular intervals onto our beds as we lay still on our backs with no top sheet in summer. I HATE SPIDERS.

I also hate porridge. Every morning we had porridge but we were a bit naughty. We had tin plates and we used to fling them out onto the lawn and Olwyn Wilson used to get out of bed and recover them before the nurses came back. Her parents used to come up to the wall in a horse drawn cart and stand up and throw chocolates over when the coast was clear. I often wondered how the lawn ever got mowed it was thick with porridge. I HATE PORRIDGE.

We were all terrified of Sister Kath Hardiman. Even my mum was terrified of her. She was in charge of our ward. BUT I can remember when a small boy went home after a long stay and she cried. We didn't even think she was human.

Except for 6 months we did not have any schooling and there were no books or games unless your parents bought them for you. We had Mrs Jocelyn for a teacher for 6 months. Parents were allowed to visit on Wednesdays and Sundays for one hour only. After a time I was relocated to the other side of the ward but still on an open veranda which formed a square and there was lawn in the middle. I can remember people in iron lungs and one boy, Eddie McCabe, was totally encased in plaster with a little penis hole. I never saw the other side but I guess he had a bottom hole as well.

After a long time a Physiotherapist was appointed, Lesley Shaw, who later married Dr Peter Breheny, and we had regular exercise. There was a home visit probably close to the time I was discharged and I had my hair cut. All my beautiful curls chopped off and oodles of fillings in my teeth. I have no recollection of ever cleaning my teeth in hospital. My mother who at the time of writing this is 94 years old only told me last year 2007 that when people walked up our street they used to cross the road and not walk past our house because of the Polio scare.

By the time I was strong enough to stand and eventually walk my left leg was very thin. It became known as my Polio Leg or, for added attention, My Poor Sore Leg. My left leg was affected from my knee down to my foot.

Eventually, after celebrating my 7th and 8th Birthdays in hospital, I was discharged just before they moved all the Polio people to Fairfield

I returned to my former School in 1951 and to the same class of children I had left in 1949. I remember the first day everyone wanted to hold my hand and be my friend but things soon got back to normal. Initially I went to school only for the morning. Just as well Dad worked from home and had a car as he had to collect me. When I was allowed to stay all day I had to lie down and rest in the lunch hour which I really hated.

In 1953 when I was in Year 6 it was decided that I should wear a calliper to prevent my ankle rolling over. This really drew attention to my leg and one day I was in the shopping centre in Bendigo tucking my trousers into the iron frame so they did not get caught in the spokes of my bike wheel when two women went passed and one made a comment about me to the other and they both laughed at me so I threw the bike down and kicked her as hard as I could. I also had the heel of my shoe built up as my left leg was half an inch shorter than my right.

In 1956 at the end of the year I was taken to St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne and Mr Thomas King, Orthopaedic Surgeon, fused the bones in my left ankle .The highlight of being in hospital at this time was TELEVISION and I can remember watching Ken Rosewall and Lou Hoad winning the Davis Cup.

I had my leg in plaster for 6 months and so had crutches. Because my Dad was President of the Bendigo Ambulance Service I used to travel to Melbourne by ambulance sometimes for checkups and once we had to cover the races at Kyneton so I was hobbling along when one of the stablemen started chatting to me and told me in all seriousness that if I watered my leg it would grow to be the same size as the other. AS IF!!!

When my plaster finally came off all my skin was foul smelling and shrivelled up. I was also scared my leg would fall to bit or break but soon I was out and about and playing sport like there was no tomorrow. We were told we were as good as any other kids and encouraged to play as much sport as possible but recent readings suggest this may not be so and may have caused damage.

The next highlight was some dress shoes and looking back they really were the ugliest shoes you have ever seen and we had to travel to a surgical boot maker in Preston to have them made .When I was teaching at Moonee Ponds Central School in 1963 I took them in to be resoled and heeled and the boot maker nearly died when he saw how huge and ugly they were. He told me to go into the city to Myer and get a pair of shoes that fitted my right leg and he would wait for me to come back and he would fix them for me. He did and I will never forget the first night I went to Hawthorn Town Hall Dance in my new shoes with my friend Ev who was wearing her new contact lenses and for the first she could see who was asking her to dance as she would not wear her glasses. When one of her lenses fell out we were crawling around the floor looking for it as in those days they were so expensive .That night she met Keith and they all lived happily ever after.

When I applied to do teaching I was placed on Limited Superannuation because of my Polio but I was expected to complete the same course and teach the same subjects as all other teachers including Physical Education and Sport. When I married I had to resign from the Superannuation Scheme but was allowed to rejoin later. When I went for my medical I was pregnant with my second child and there was a lot of baby talk and not a lot of Polio talk and I rejoined with full benefits.

I am the mother of the two most beautiful children in the world and despite the Polio I had both of them naturally. When my son Aaron was in year 2 at Rosanna Golf Links Primary School he had a wonderful teacher Debbie Gill and she was reading the story "I Can Jump Puddles" by Alan Marshall whom I had met as a school student. Aaron was telling us about this man who had had Polio and his father, my then husband, said "Pauline has had Polio. Show Aaron your polio leg." As I always wore slacks he had never seen his mothers' legs and went racing out the door and came back with about 8 of his friends and asked me to show them my Polio leg too. Aaron was never one for participating in the morning session of 'Show and Tell' - a man of few words. His teacher rang me later and told me how he was absolutely bursting to tell her his news and so she asked him and he said "Miss Gill, Boys and Girls my mum has had Polio" and sat down.

My daughter Marika tells me when I get really pathetic I pull the Polio Leg. I can limp as good as anyone and even worse than I normally do when caught in traffic. I can remember being in Little Bourke Street one night with George my fiancé and I had gone into David Jones to collect a present. He was illegally parked and the Parking Officer arrived to book him as I was coming out of the store. He was mouthing "LIMP" to me and I really limped on my Polio leg and we did not get a ticket. Sometimes even now I can be a bit naughty and use the Polio leg.

Perhaps one of the naughtiest things I did with a friend who shall remain nameless was to take sick day from work and go to see and meet Maeve Binchy at the book launch for "Tara Road". My friend was not all that well and I knew she would not be there the following day as I was going with her and had booked a replacement teacher. The Principal just happened to pass as she was dry retching and told her to take tomorrow off and asked me to book a replacement. As I was Assistant principal I was not replaced and I told him I had to go for my annual Polio check up. The next morning we had to be on the road about the same time as the school traffic and she lived near the school. I had a very well known old Mercedes Benz with a personal number plate - not good for being inconspicuous - so she hid under the dashboard until we were out of the neighbourhood. The following day she was back at work much to the Principal's surprise as he had expected her to have at least two days off and he asked me "How did everything go?" and I said "I have still had Polio." We often laugh about it.

Now I am 65. I still limp. My left leg is still thin. My left foot is now one whole size smaller than my right foot and buying shoes is still a nightmare as I can only wear a very small heel because of my fused ankle. I still have my left shoe built up a quarter of an inch or 6 mm. Boots in the Winter and sandals with adjustable straps in the Summer. I have two speeds SLOW and DEAD SLOW. I can walk all day but at my own pace and have travelled extensively mostly in Europe and especially in Italy. When I grow up I want to be an Italian! I do have some drama occasionally with my back because of the lopsidedness but have a wonderful Physio who thinks I am amazing. Can't be much better than that.

Polio certainly has left its mark on me and made me the person I am in many ways but that is my story and I look forward to any years to come and perhaps one day grandchildren with whom to share my story and to show them the famous Polio leg.