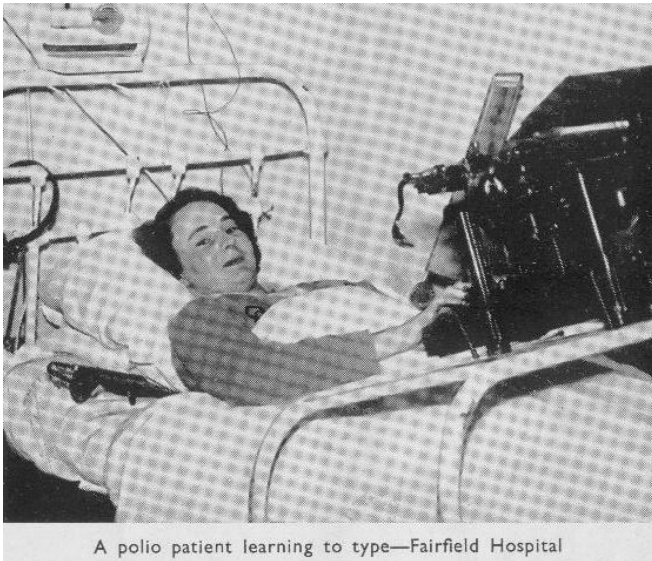


Barbara Watson's Story



A polio patient learning to type—Fairfield Hospital

My name is Barbara Watson [nee Gould] and I contracted polio in October 1951 at the age of 14. I had 2 sisters, Sandra the younger one and I shared a bed, and Marina the eldest slept in the same room, neither of them contracted polio. I attended Brighton Technical School and there were no cases from there or St Andrews Church, which I also attended.

When my left arm was paralysed our doctor said I had tennis elbow. By the next day my left leg was paralysed too. I could not swallow food that night and was sent to bed without tea. The next night I was taken by ambulance to Fairfield Hospital where I was isolated for 3 weeks. I was paralysed down the left side and weak on the right side.

The lumbar puncture I had to endure with 2 nurses holding me is still vivid in my mind. My mother used to send Marina, my elder sister, down to the phone box each day after school to ring the hospital for an update on my condition. She couldn't reach the phone and had to take a box to stand on. My parents came to see me at weekends as Brighton was a long way from Fairfield. They had to travel by 1 tram, 2 trains and a bus. I had plaster casts made from my feet to my knees and was strapped into a metal and leather 'Double Thomas' splint day and night with only the lower part of my right arm free to eat or read. Physiotherapists gave me very painful exercises twice a day and I also had daily hot baths. I still cannot tolerate nerve reaction tests without becoming hysterical.

I was put on an open veranda in Ward 9 with other children around my age. It was very cold at night. I remember having seven blankets on my bed to keep warm. In the warmer weather it was quite pleasant. I was moved inside Ward 9 with other ladies as I was going through puberty and it was so embarrassing to have nurses attending to personal needs.

Gradually I got strength back in my lower left arm and began making cane baskets and trays. I did a correspondence course through The Royal Melbourne Technical College studying English and Shorthand. The ladies were moved upstairs to Ward 10, which was much smaller. I tried to use a typewriter on a specially tilted bed table – sometimes helping prepare the first issues of the Fairfield Newsletter. It was originally called "Fairfax" but that was soon changed to "Fairfacts". In those days we typed on wax paper. Everyone was encouraged to provide articles and we all contributed poems or stories.

My mother was able to visit me every Wednesday with clean clothes. Her brother had a car and he used to bring her to see me. My father and Marina would visit on different days at the weekends. I rarely saw my younger sister Sandra. My father used to go fishing and sometimes I would get a lovely fish meal brought into me.

On one occasion, a filling came out of one of my front teeth and I developed an abscess. The hospital dentist was not able to do anything so my father asked the family dentist to come and look at it. The only thing he could do was remove it and I spent the rest of my time in hospital with a missing front tooth. I was so restless at night that my bandages would become loose and I would be woken up by the night nurse for the bandages to be tightened. They said I was rebellious and, as it happened so often, I was given sleeping pills but they didn't make any difference.

I was then transferred to Ward 18 where general patients were convalescing. It was a very large ward and I was the only 'polio' there. I still had trouble at night with the bandages. I got very upset and tried hard not to loosen them. The night sister would come around with a torch to check on me and I used to plead with her not to mention it in her report.

I remember going home for a weekend in a long pram with the Double Thomas splint. My father took me out in the pram, my mother wouldn't come. I also remember people crossing to the other side of the street to avoid us. My school friends wrote to me, sent me comics and a couple of girls actually came all the way to Fairfield to see me. After 16 months I was measured for a full length calliper on my left leg and taught to walk with a walking stick. The first thing I did was go to the toilet. After 18 months I went home with the plaster casts for my legs and feet. One day I took them out in the back yard and destroyed them with an axe.

My mother had tried to get me into a Nursing Home as she didn't want to look after me at home, but I was too young. My mother never coped with the fact I had polio – she was embarrassed. I was always referred to as 'my other daughter', but only when she had to refer to me at all. I lost my name when I got polio. She would always walk several paces ahead of me if we were out and tell me to hurry up. I did not talk about polio problems as she was not interested.

I had physio at home for a while and subsequently went back to school doing 3 subjects, English, shorthand and typing. I was not allowed to sit down due to a weak hip muscle so went to school sometimes twice a day by bus using a long calliper, walking stick and standing behind the driver. The woodwork class at the Boy's school made a special wooden frame for me to stand at for my lessons. I spent 7 months back at school and then resumed my correspondence course in English and shorthand. I was still not allowed to sit and had to eat either lying down or standing up. If my parents went to the pictures I would stand against the back wall.

When I turned 16 my mother wanted me to look for a job saying I could not expect them to keep me. At that stage I was wearing a short calliper on my left leg and not using a walking stick. I found it difficult to get a job as I was told I would not fit in with the rest of the staff due to my disability, or I would not be able to work as well as the other staff. This only made me more determined to get a job and prove them wrong. My mother made me do chores around the house; vacuuming, doing the dishes and washing my own clothes. I also had to pay one third of my salary as board. I got a job in a Solicitors office and went to night school for 2 years, continuing with typing and shorthand. I stayed in the legal profession all my working life. My last position was 18 years with the same law firm and I was well respected for my work.

I am sure I had polio twice because as a child my lower left leg was always discoloured and thinner than my right leg. When I asked my mother about it she said it has always been like that. My left leg was the worst affected when I got polio at 14. I still envy polios who had loving, caring parents.

I married at 23 and had 2 sons. I managed without a calliper for many years and lead a relatively normal life until I got post-polio syndrome which brought back muscle weakness, pain and an inability to continue working due to constant fatigue. I had to go back to wearing a short calliper on my left leg and using a walking stick. Now my walking is limited and sometimes I have to use a wheel chair.

My two sisters have always been very supportive, helpful and made me feel normal. My husband, Allan, and sons, Gary and Darin, have always very supportive and understanding. My 2 grandsons, Lincoln and Connor, are wonderful the way they look after me and where I walk. I have travelled to a lot of great countries and seen many things other polio's have not been able to do. I could not have done this without the help of my husband.

Since retiring, I have been involved in volunteer work for Paraquad Victoria, the Polio Network, the Polio Advisory Committee as both a member and Chair, 2 Council Disability Committees, a Polio Support Group, and a Probus Committee. I have also spoken to children in schools on the importance of immunisation.

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