

Polio – The US v's Australia

By Philip Minter



I grew up in Australia and I found that there were similarities and differences in the way the disease was treated in the respective countries. I was born in 1928.

The school year in Australia starts in February and commencement is usually the second week of December (which is almost summer). I completed grade 12 in 1945 (just after the end of World War II). At the end of November we had completed all the exams for matriculation to the university and we were waiting around for commencement. The school authorities decided the boys could be occupied scrubbing out the swimming pool. The water was lowered to a few feet and we all went into the dirty water with scrubbing brushes. Naturally we fooled round, as teenage boys do, and most of us got mouthfuls of dirty water.

The following Saturday, two of my friends came over to my home, where we gathered in close contact in my bedroom. The following Monday instead of going to school my father took me to an auction. When we returned home in the afternoon I had a moderated fever and I vividly remember the serious pain in my neck when I put my head down. My mother was worried and called our general practitioner (in those days they came to our home). He arrived the next day and decided to draw my spinal fluid and send it to a pathology laboratory. Within hours the lab phoned to confirm that they had identified the poliovirus.

Now, my mother was a physiotherapist (in fact she was the state president of the association) so she wanted to look after me at home. However the State Department of Health insisted that I had to go the isolation hospital. (This was a similarity with procedures in the US). I remember being carried out of our home on a stretcher and put in an ambulance for a 40-mile ride to the hospital (that was my first time in an ambulance). The hospital was on the coast way south of Sydney near the maximum-security penitentiary. The only good thing about it was that it was new and on good days we were wheeled out onto the verandah and could watch ships at sea. When I got there I found that I was in very large ward with nine other boys all of whom had been scrubbing out the school swimming pool. (It was curious that the two boys who had been with me in my room on the Saturday before I got sick never got polio). Dr. Bruno's book, *The Polio Paradox*, tells how, in many cases, the family did not see the polio child until they were released. This was a major difference with our experience in Australia – my mother visited me almost every day and several of my friends were permitted to visit me.

In 1945 there was no TV. While I was in the hospital I did get newspapers and I had a subscription to Life Magazine. The news, at that time, was covering the terrible findings when the camps such as Auschwitz were being released. Another worry we encountered concerned the senior RN on our floor. Her husband had been a prisoner of the Japanese and had survived 4 years of horror. Then before the allies could get to the prison camps in the jungle, they were dropping supplies by air. Sometimes there were no parachutes available, and the allies had to drop these supplies from a low height. Sadly, one of these boxes fell on her husband and killed him. She was devastated and we were all sorry for her.



After about 2 months I was released from the hospital and my mother went to work on me. She had me consult with an orthopedic surgeon. He prescribed a back brace and exercises that my mother worked on. As I had missed the opening of the college year, it was decided that I should repeat grade 12 in high school. Most sports were out for me so I took up rifle shooting. I became the captain of the school shooting team and won several cups. By the end of 1946 I again matriculated and entered the University of Sydney in February 1947. In 1951 I gained a Bachelor of Science degree with First Class Honors. By that time I had dispensed with the back brace, could jog for about a mile, lift weights and do push-ups. Because my abdominal muscles had been paralyzed I was never able to lie on my back and do lift-ups.

The book *The Polio Paradox* makes very interesting points on the way children in the US were treated when they were diagnosed as having Polio. Dr. Bruno states that many recovering from polio felt ashamed and tried to cover any residual weakness by becoming type A characters. I never was ashamed and told everyone that I had polio. I guess I did become a type A person since, after coming to America in 1957 I gained an MS from the University of Wyoming and went on to acquire a PhD in Communications at the University of Wisconsin. While I was in Wisconsin I married, Mary, a graduate who was then working as an interior designer. After our marriage and my graduation we left for Australia, via England and Europe.

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Following initial cultural shock, Mary settled in and eventually was elected as Secretary of the American Women’s Club in Sydney. Members of the club were mostly wives of senior American executives who had been posted to Australia. She also started to work with a woman who was selling furniture. I got a position with a major Public Relations Firm. We had two daughters.

I was happy when I was able to accept the post as Chief of Information with the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) in Atlanta, GA. Mary was most unhappy in Atlanta, and sadly was always seen as a “northerner”. She never felt as though she fit in. In 1968, we were both happy when I was offered a faculty position at the University of Pennsylvania where I directed the initial work to develop a computer program, now known as Med-Line. This provides medical information in the Internet.

I formed a company to work with major pharmaceutical companies who wanted to train their sales representative about new drugs. An engineer joined me and we started to develop manuals and videotapes to train dealers about new systems being introduced on their vehicles. One of the first clients was Mack Trucks. British Leyland (Jaguar, Rover and Triumph) followed. That company was so pleased with the work we were doing for their American branch that they asked us to work out of England to provide training for their dealers worldwide. As a result, we incorporated in England as well.

Living in Philadelphia provided the opportunity to be elected as President of a number of interesting organizations. Shortly after arrival in the City of Brotherly Love, I was asked to join the British Officers’ Club. (This was formed on Veteran’s Day 1919 by returning American and immigrating British Officers who had fought together in World War I). In 1992 I was elected as president. Not only was I the first Australian to become president but also I was the first Non-Brit. In the mid 1980’s a group known as “The Royal Heritage Society” acquired “Ormiston Mansion”, one of the historic homes in Fairmont Park. I was appointed as one of the first directors and in 1988 I organized an exhibition to commemorate the Bi-centennial of Australia. This was held in the Mansion and opened by the Australian Consul-General from New York. For 3 years I was National President of the 3,500 Sydney University Graduates in North America. I also became President of the Wisconsin Alumni Association for the Delaware Valley. Mary and I were married for 40 years until her death from Alzheimer’s disease in 1999. I was able to tell her story, in a book titled *Alzheimer’s, Life in Reverse*.

I wish I had read Dr. Bruno’s book sooner. Over the years my doctors told me I must do serious exercise – I jogged, walked miles, bought a treadmill, and lifted weights. Had I known that instead of strengthening my muscles I was damaging the remaining neurons I would have spent more time resting. About 2011, I started to experience balance problems, so I started to walk with a cane, then a walker, and now a wheelchair. Rather than feel ashamed about this I am always amazed at how people go out of their way to help me.

About four years ago I went to live at my daughter’s home. Apart from a woman who came in three days a week to help me shower, I mostly looked after myself. In October, 2015 when my daughter brought me dinner I was not able to stand or speak. She and my son-in-law rushed me to the hospital. On admission the doctor thought I had pneumonia but after further tests, it was determined that I had “beta hemolytic group-B strep”. I needed anti-biotic IV injections every four hours for seven weeks, and was sent to a nursing facility. After seven weeks I was free from the bacteria. It was recommended I spend my days in an extended care center. I was unhappy being surrounded by so many patients with Alzheimer’s disease.

I was happy when my beloved sister Adeline invited me to come back to where it all began. I have moved back to Australia and live with her. I chose to remain active and have joined the Australian Post-Polio Association.

