

Remember: Polio – Disease 'struck terror' into York County, Pennsylvania

Most people don't believe Don Slaugh had polio.

He contracted the infectious disease in the summer of 1941, along with more than 100 other York Countians. At least nine people died from an epidemic that year that closed schools, banned children from public events and spread fear throughout the community. The virus mostly infected children, but it also hit adults.



Slaugh, 77, of Manchester Township, Pa, stands just short of 6 feet tall. He has no contractures -- a permanent shortening of muscles, tendons or scar tissue that results in a deformity or distortion -- or recurring symptoms, also known as post-polio syndrome. He has had good health for most of his life.

He said he's one of the lucky ones. He got polio when he was 5 years old. His mother had told him not to go swimming in a creek at Brookside Park in Dover Township. He did anyway and thinks that's where he was infected. Slaugh became "deathly ill" on a Friday night after traveling by train with his parents and brother to Lancaster, where his grandparents lived. His family had planned to go to a picnic at Hershey Park the following day.

"All I remember, I couldn't move," he said.

His parents took him to Lancaster General Hospital, which, he said, practiced the controversial Sister Elizabeth Kenny treatment. Sister Kenny, an unaccredited Australian nurse, thought patients needed warm compresses and movement. Many health professionals believed polio patients should be kept still. Slaugh received a blood transfusion from his father, who also had polio years before. He remembers lying in bed and looking at an older patient who was in an iron lung, a machine then used to enable people to breathe. "I remember being very scared," he said.

Slaugh left the hospital after two weeks and returned to his North York home. His mom followed the treatment recommended by his doctors in Lancaster -- movement and warm compresses. He said he had to check in with the health department in York, which practiced conventional treatment. "They put you in braces and hoped you lived happily ever after," he said. Slaugh said his mom put arm and back braces on him only when he went in for check-ups in York. The disease mainly affected his upper body. Some experts thought muscles should be splinted and immobilized to straighten a patient's body. Some say Kenny's principles of muscle rehabilitation became the foundation of physical therapy. "They were so awkward," he said. "I couldn't walk around in them."

Polio -- also known as infantile paralysis -- infected thousands of people each year in the U.S. before a vaccine was developed in 1955, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. From 1937 to 1950, 226,306 cases of paralytic and nonparalytic polio were reported, according to Post-Polio Health International.

Dr. Charles Reilly, former chairman of pediatrics at York Hospital, was just finishing up medical school at the University of Pennsylvania when the vaccine was introduced. The 85-year-old Manchester Township resident said the virus and research surrounding it were important topics of his curriculum. "It struck terror into many people," Reilly said. He said some of the public health protocol, which urged against people gathering in groups, helped to prevent transmission.



"People just held their breath and prayed a lot," Reilly said. "There was nothing they could do except follow the public health recommendations."

Don married Pat (his high school sweetheart) 61 years ago. They were blessed with two sons.

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<http://www.papolionetwork.org/survivor-stories-from-the-keystone-state.html>