



Polio and COVID19 – Then and Now From Three Polio Survivors

By the PA Immunization Coalition (PAIC)

(Article Summary)



LIVING THROUGH POLIO AND COVID-19: HISTORIC PARALLELS

“One of the most prominent similarities in the two viruses is the existence of debilitating, persistent adverse health effects in some of the exposed. Both long-haul COVID-19 and post-polio syndrome occur in a subset of survivors.” “Young and old, and otherwise healthy people can still suffer from persistent COVID-19 symptoms despite recovering and testing negative for the virus.”

“There are countless people who contracted and survived polio in the 1940s-50s that live with the effects of Post-Polio Syndrome today, and now they are living through yet another pandemic with COVID-19. PAIC had the unique opportunity to speak with three polio survivors from the PA Polio Survivors Network who were willing to share their extraordinary experiences and unique perspectives on COVID-19.”

Deborah ‘Deb’ Stambaugh was five years old, living in Petersburg, West Virginia when she felt ill while playing outside of her family home in the summer of 1954.

Shirley Smith was born in 1938 in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. One day, 12-year old Shirley was too tired to feed the chickens or hold her 9-month-old niece.

Joe Randig started school in September of 1952 when he didn’t feel well two weeks later. Coming in from playing outside early, his mother grew concerned. He had a fever, headache, and stiff neck.

PAIC - “. . . Are there any significant similarities you’ve noticed between the Polio Epidemic and the current COVID-19 Pandemic?”

Deb – “The uncertainty of how severe the disease you have contracted will affect your body. The unknown of what was ahead.”

Long stays in a hospital quarantined from everyone,
No physical contact with loved ones.

Age 5, 100 miles away from family, only to see them through a window during quarantine days. Then only on weekends for the remainder of a 6 month stay.

It was also hard on the families financially and emotionally.

Shirley – “The long-term effects. You live with the belief if you keep trying, you’ll get better.”

I still walk with two crutches and leg braces.

People who contract COVID-19 don’t know what their long-term effects will be, it is different for everyone.

Irrational fears about the epidemic and pandemic are similar. Although we lived on an isolated farm, I still remember them closing the pools and the summer fears. The family was quarantined . . .”

Joe – “I think the main similarities between the polio virus and the coronavirus would be fear.”

Even though the polio virus has been around probably forever it still would bring fear to parents. A family never knew who or where it was going to strike and how severe the outcome would be.

Fear of the coronavirus was fear of the unknown. At first, we didn’t know where it came from or how it was transmitted, and it spread around the world like a wildfire.

The results of the polio virus were unpredictable. There was no way of knowing if your child was going to be sick for a few weeks or never walk again or die.

TWO DIFFERENT VACCINE ERAS

“Both polio and COVID-19 are highly contagious, but some measures taken to prevent their spread differ.”

continued

“Efforts for ‘social distancing’ were voluntary and selective in nature.” “Businesses in localities would close when there was an outbreak, such as bowling alleys, movie theaters, and public pools. Interventions targeted the vulnerable, affected populations rather than on a state or even national basis.”

“When Salk’s vaccine underwent initial testing, approximately two million children were involved. Once the vaccine was licensed and proven effective there were massive programs launched to bring the shot, and eventually the oral vaccine, to the public via large events that families attended to be vaccinated.

“ . . . Americans unified against polio, feeling a sense of community. . . .” “Though the messaging may be similar, the coronavirus vaccine is more polarizing than the polio vaccine. Widespread vaccine hesitancy and misinformation have been significant markers of the pandemic.”

PAIC - “ . . . Are there differences that you can recall between the Polio Vaccine rollout and prevention measures compared to those for COVID-19? Was there opposition to the Polio Vaccine that you can recall?

Deb - “ Everyone got in line at fire companies, schools, and clinics. People couldn’t wait for that precious sugar cube to protect them from the poliovirus.”

No one questioned it. This is how the Polio Vaccine is received (now) in foreign countries.

People years ago had faith in the doctors and caregivers to provide them with the latest information and people did not question as they do today.”

Shirley – “I had polio in 1950, the vaccine came out in 1955. I went to a residential rehab in Philadelphia.” We thought we were “the last of the kind” once the vaccine was proven effective, we believed nobody would have polio anymore. It was a welcome relief.”

Even though there was one bad batch, people still believed in the science and were not discouraged. President Roosevelt was an inspiration for those that had polio.

Joe – “The development of the polio vaccine was an enormous, long-awaited achievement. Scientists worked on creating the vaccine for years followed by several years of testing.”

The March of Dimes established by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938 was the leading force behind the research that produced a polio vaccine.

On April 12, 1955, researchers announced the vaccine is safe and effective. Total joy and relief spread across the country. Church bells rang, newspapers had big headlines on the front page. People lined up as soon as possible to get vaccinated.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST and PROTECTING THE FUTURE

PAIC - “Are there any major lessons from the polio epidemic(s) and post-polio syndrome that you would like parents and other individuals to learn from? Would you consider yourself a vaccine advocate?

Deb – “It will change their lives FOREVER! As a child, other children accept you as you are. When I entered high school, the discrimination started. I stayed in my small group of friends and kept a low profile. After graduation I went to a business school and was accepted for me. I often said I preferred business school over high school any day.”

“I am adamant about vaccines” As I deal with post-polio syndrome and the inability to maneuver around as I did in the past, I feel it is most important that vaccinations are taken seriously. COVID-19 long haulers may someday face the same issues, as they deal with complications of the COVID-19.

Shirley – “The idea of herd immunity - ‘I’ll eventually come down with it and then I’ll be immune’.”

People need to know there’s long-term effects with these infectious diseases. You may recover, but there are long-term effects that will potentially alter the rest of your life and the quality of it. Make sure your information comes from a good source.”

Most definitely, I am a vaccine advocate. All of my children are vaccinated.

Joe – “I am definitely a vaccine advocate and have been since my involvement with Dr. Salk’s vaccine work.”

The polio vaccine monitoring continued for about 10 years. We would periodically return to the D.T. Watson Home for blood testing. My Dad made a 10-year commitment to Dr. Salk’s vaccine testing program. We made the 70-mile roundtrip drive many, many from 1954 to 1961 and that has always impressed me.

“I believe that vaccines are a miracle of modern medicine, they should be understood and appreciated and accepted. Over the years vaccines have saved millions from death and disease.”