

An Unexpected Journey

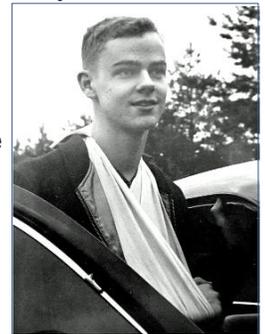
In celebration of the life of Lauro S. Halstead, MD

By Pamela Sergey

Have you ever asked yourself if polio, in a curious way, enriched your life? *Unexpected Journey: A Physician's Life in the Shadow of Polio* recounts Dr. Lauro Halstead's personal quest to answer this question.

Dr. Halstead's middle name is Storm, an old family name, but what is a storm? Chaos, fear, uncertainty, disruption and change? In a very obvious way, Dr. Halstead lived through his personal "storm". In *Unexpected Journey* Dr. Halstead speaks poignantly about both his struggles and his successes with polio. In the book's Preface, he wrote "it was a journey that seldom followed a straight and narrow path as I struggled with issues of love and career, friendships and illness." "Through the slow, demanding process of writing, I hoped to gain greater insight into how I went from one stepping stone to another - rising from a near-death experience like the mythical phoenix and gradually, through a series of hits and misses, carving out a life that had meaning and joy." (1)

A healthy 18 year old musician and lover of all things Italian, Dr. Halstead developed polio in 1954 while hitchhiking through Europe on his college summer vacation. While in Madrid he suddenly lost the use of his right arm, and his breathing became labored. Nurses at the local Catholic children's hospital stuffed his 6' 4" frame into a makeshift plywood respirator built for a much smaller child. A priest came in to administer the Last Rights to which Dr. Halstead gasped "Go to Hell". Dr. Halstead remembers thinking "I'm young. My life is just beginning. There's so many things I want to do." He wasn't going to give up! Dr. Halstead stayed in the wooden respirator for eighteen days. "I was essentially alone (without family in a strange country). And what made it worse was in those days, the dictator of Spain, Franco, in an effort to conserve electricity, turned off all power in the city of Madrid from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. And so the respirator went dead at 2 a.m. and just by the grace of God, I managed to survive and eventually get back to the United States."(2) The teenager went to a rehabilitative hospital in White Plains, NY. "This picture was taken sometime in late September or early October, 1954 on the occasion of my first outing from the rehabilitation hospital in White Plains, New York. I remember seeing the fall colors and thinking how glorious it was to be alive. Not shown is the manual wheelchair which I used for the first six months." (3)



Source: [Polio Place](https://www.polio-place.org/)



Lauro Halstead (right). Source: [Polio Place](https://www.polio-place.org/)

"This picture was taken in the summer of 1955 approximately one year after my initial illness. A local man heard that I had played the trombone (and to a lesser degree, the baritone) for many years before polio. He was interested in the healing power of music and organized this rag-tag group to play at various senior centers, etc. in the area." (3)

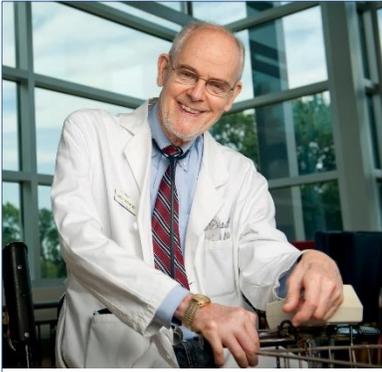
Although his right arm was completely paralyzed, he learned to write with his left hand and resorted to creative ways to perform two-handed activities with only his left hand. Despite these setbacks, he decided to go to medical school. Dr. Halstead received his BA from Haverford College, an MD degree from the University of Rochester Medical School, and an MPH (Master of Public Health) degree from Harvard

University School of Public Health.

In *Unexpected Journey*, he writes passionately about climbing Japan's Mount Fuji's full 12,388 feet in 1957, exactly 3 years to the day after contacting polio; of his utopic family's summer home in VT, Storm Acres; of getting in touch with his Italian heritage while studying in Rome; of developing a technique for facilitating fertility and conception in spinal cord injured patients; and of working in a hospital in India where his parents had been missionaries. He also writes frankly and courageously about two failed marriages and his all-time rock bottom.

Dr. Halstead is credited with identifying and treating PPS (Post-Polio Sequelae), or what he called his "polio wall". In late 1982, Dr. Halstead began experiencing unexplained weaknesses in his legs. It was

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Source: MedStar National Rehab
Hospital Washington DC

misdiagnosed as ALS. But the pain was not something new: "It felt exactly like the muscle pain I'd had when I got polio almost 30 years earlier. Was my body sending me a message from long ago?" At the medical library, he found very little other than a Mayo Clinic study from 1972 which reported polio survivors developing new weaknesses that could not be otherwise explained. They called it "Frustrated ALS"; and a 1981 article on nerve conductivity in polio survivors published by Ohio State University. "Their results were totally unexpected and suggested that as polio patients aged, their muscles and nerves started to decompensate." (1)

In 1984, Halstead organized the first medical conference on Post-Polio Syndrome in Warm Springs, Ga. (the location was founded in 1926 by Franklin Roosevelt to treat polio survivors). Dr. Halstead would go on to receive many awards for his work on PPS and to improve the lives of fellow polio survivors by spreading knowledge and treatment options to those struggling with PPS.

Dr. Halstead retired in June 2012 after 50 years in the medical field. 26 of those years as Director of the Spinal Cord Injury Program and Director of the Post-polio Clinic at the MedStar National Rehabilitation Hospital in Washington DC. Dr. Halstead wrote several other books on the subject of Post-Polio:

- Research and Clinical Aspects of the Late Effects of Poliomyelitis (1987),
- Post-Polio Syndrome: Late Effects of Poliomyelitis (1995),
- Managing Post-Polio: A Guide to Living and Aging Well With Post-Polio Syndrome (2006).

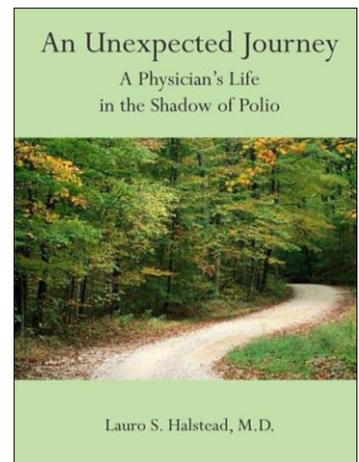
None of his books are as personal and poignant as *Unexpected Journey: A Physician's Life in the Shadow of Polio*. In *Unexpected Journey*, Dr. Halstead answers the original question about polio enriching his life this way: "I suppose that's possible. I may not have become a physician, and instead might have lived a carefree life in southern France making my own wine and perfecting my use of irregular verbs. As it is, being a disabled adult has given me a perspective on life I wouldn't otherwise have had." "So, yes. These experiences have enriched my life beyond measure. However, on balance, I can honestly say polio has been both a curse and a blessing. But what well-lived life doesn't contain a little of both?" (1)

Dr. Halstead loved music. "I don't remember how long I played the baritone that I'm holding in the photo (previous page), but, for some reason, I gave it up in favor of playing the piano with my left hand. I regret that I stopped playing the baritone because I could have been playing in bands and orchestras all these years. On the bright side, at the suggestion of a musical friend, I resumed playing the baritone three years ago and am now playing with three local groups. Last year, I had the pleasure of playing with an amateur group at the Kennedy Center in a Christmas concert." (3)

His advice to young people: "I think an important element for any young person is the whole concept of resilience and perseverance. I mean, no one's life is free of problems, of challenges, of confrontations. And I think it's absolutely critical that everybody learn how to deal with misfortune, with events that are out of their control, with challenges, whether it's physical, emotional, financial."

Sadly, Dr. Halstead passed away on January 5, 2022. Those who knew him will miss his warm sense of humor and caring ways. Dr. Lauro de Bosis Storm Halstead was the "perfect Storm".

Pamela Sergey



Article Sources:

- (1) [Unexpected Journey: A Physician's Life in the Shadow of Polio](#)
- (2) 11/2012 interview with Sabri Ben-Achour from WAMU – American University Radio - Metro Connection
- (3) Polio Place www.polioplac.org/history/artifacts/lauro-halstead