

Photo: Myrna Hudson

Las Vegas SUN

620

July 03, 1999

Polio's return

Former victims affected later

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LAS VEGAS SUN

During the first half of the 20th century polio was a major health threat around the world. At its peak in the United States in 1952, about 20,000 cases were diagnosed.

With the introduction of an injected vaccine in 1955 by Dr. Jonas Salk and an oral vaccine by Dr. Albert Sabin in 1961, cases were dramatically reduced to 10 or fewer a year.

The World Health Organization is optimistically hoping to eradicate polio via the vaccine.

But a little more than a decade ago, those who contracted the virus in their youth and thought they beat the disease were suddenly slapped into a rude awakening. They discovered the demons of polio had returned. And this time, there would be no reprieve.

Former sufferers of polio began complaining in the early 1980s of fatigue, breathing problems, muscle weakness and overall body pain. At first doctors couldn't explain the symptoms. Some physicians thought their patients were hypochondriacs.

Then in May 1984 at a support group conference in Warm Springs, Ga., the phrase "post-polio syndrome" was coined. The disease finally had an official name and its legitimacy was recognized.

Las Vegan Myrna Hudson contracted polio at age 8 in 1946. Her disease was bilateral, affecting both sides of her body from the waist down and into her throat.

Hudson lived in Fort Morgan, Colo., about 90 miles northeast of Denver. Once a week she traveled to that city to undergo intensive physical therapy. There, technicians moved her legs in painful exercises. At home three times a day, her mother worked on bending her legs and moving her ankles from side to side.

Like many people who had polio, Hudson said she was encouraged to develop a "can-do" attitude. All it took, she remembers being told, was pushing her muscles hard.

"At age 10, I started running 50-yard dashes in school," Hudson, 61, said of her competitive attitude as a teenager. "I thought I was well. And I thought I was over polio. I knew I had to wear special shoes, but the doctors said I was OK. They told me to just keep the physical therapy going."

Hudson married, had children and never thought about her polio until she started experiencing leg cramps and balance problems around age 50. At night, she said, her legs felt like they had worms crawling all over them.

To date researchers still don't know what causes post-polio syndrome. They suspect that nerve cells were damaged by the original polio and during the next 25 to 40 years, muscles begin to lose nerve stimulation

and start weakening.

Polio is a virus that attacks the central nervous system. It enters the body through the nasal cavity or throat and inflames the nerves in the spinal cord and lower brain.

A person with polio experiences severe tightening of the muscles, which causes some of the muscles to weaken and not develop properly.

With other forms of polio, the respiratory system may be affected. Many children in the 1950s were encased in huge iron lungs, which looked like large hot-water tanks, to help them breathe. Iron lungs were the forerunners of today's respirators.

Treatment for polio in the 1950s was based on the teachings of an Australian nurse, Sister Elizabeth Kenny. She believed the muscles needed to be worked to relieve the tightness.

Kenny used hot packs on the infected muscles to loosen them, then had patients stretch and work their muscles through exercise to strengthen them.

Her method was called "muscle re-education," or the retraining of the muscle so it could function again.

Hudson was a follower of Sister Kenny's method. In hindsight, some physicians today feel people with polio shouldn't have worked their muscles so hard. Now they advocate that post-polio survivors conserve what muscle strength they have.

"What I would tell someone with polio is to do limited short periods of exercise," Dr. Dean Mondell of Mountain Rehabilitation Services in Las Vegas said. "I would tell people with polio if they get tired to not push it and rest."

Mondell said it's important for post-polio patients to not be afraid or too proud to use braces again or electric scooters to get around.

"Eventually they will wear out what muscles they have left," Mondell said. "Right now physicians are trying to figure out what post-polio syndrome is. There is no treatment for it at present. Two 15-minute rest periods a day seems to be the most beneficial."

But Dr. Richard Owen, himself a polio survivor and the former medical director of the Sister Kenny Institute in Minneapolis, disagrees. He thinks muscles will continue to tighten unless they are stretched and recommends exercise three times a week at 20-minute intervals.

Owen also advises post-polio survivors to watch their weight, continue an active lifestyle and use devices to assist in walking. People who get tired during the day may have an oxygen deficiency at night, and they may need to sleep with an oxygen mask, he added.

Researchers estimate that about 75,000 of the 300,000 survivors of polio in the United States have post-polio syndrome. That's why it's so important for parents to make sure their children are vaccinated, Caroleanne Green, director of the National Polio Care Advocates of Las Vegas, says.

"There are so many people coming to Las Vegas from foreign countries who weren't vaccinated against polio," Green said. "Most doctors don't recognize the disease because they weren't trained to recognize it."

And once you have had polio, survivors such as Hudson realize you may never completely recover from it, as was hoped in the 1950s.

"Polio is a very devious condition," Hudson said. "Up front you know you are sick. In the middle you think you can beat it. And then it comes back. All my muscles are used up now because I used them to get well."

There will be a post-polio syndrome international conference Sept. 24-26 at the Four Queens hotel-casino. Price is \$75 per person, \$100 per couple. For more information call Dianne Resetar at 644-5091.

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