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Grim legacy of the polio epidemics

LATE EFFECTS OF POLIO (L.E.P.)



Echoes from the Fifties: An iron lung

POLIO was one of the most deadly diseases known to man and thousands died in the polio epidemics of the 1940s and 50s. Now, thanks to the polio vaccine introduced at the end of the 1950s, fewer than ten people a year contract polio in the UK.

However, at least 15,000 survivors of the polio epidemics are still alive today and many of them are now facing a frightening return of symptoms.

Polio, still common in many parts of the world, is caused by a virus which enters the gut and then travels to the spinal cord, where it attacks the nerves which control the muscle fibres. If the nerves are destroyed, paralysis follows: if the nerves are damaged, the muscles are seriously weakened. Most commonly, polio affects one or both legs and arms.

Most polio survivors have lived full and active lives. But now an increasing number are contacting the British Polio Fellowship with concerns about increasing weakness and pain in the muscles and joints, backache, fatigue and breathing problems.

The Fellowship is asking the Department of Health to inform GPs, many of whom were not practising prior to polio vaccine, about how to handle the possible late effects of polio.

There are a number of explanations for why polio sufferers experience late effects. Every muscle fibre has to be activated by nerve cells, but if some fibres waste away and die because their nerve cells are destroyed, others get bigger to compensate.

'People with polio may have some muscle fibres the same size as body builders,' explains Dr Geoffrey Spencer, clinical director of the Lane-Fox respiratory unit at St Thomas' Hospital. 'They are using them to the limit just to get out of a chair or walk. But just as body builders' muscle power declines after 40, so people with polio may notice loss of function earlier than the rest of us.'

'Identifying the muscles under pressure and then making small lifestyle changes for a while, such as sitting down on a high stool to wash up or using a wrist rest when typing, can give the muscle a new lease of life.'

No one knows what proportion of people will experience problems, but experts say the symptoms can be managed. Dr Joseph Cowan, director of rehabilitation at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore, says: 'Some of the problems are predictable. For instance, if someone with polio has a heart attack

How victims can be affected again many years after the first attack

By Denise Winn

and has to spend ten days in a hospital bed, when they get up they will feel weaker because they haven't been using their muscles. A careful muscle-training programme can help them get back to the way they were before.'

One common effect of polio is a curving back of the knee preventing walking. It is caused by over-stretching the ligaments to compensate for loss of thigh muscle. At St Thomas', an operation recently learned from Chinese surgeons (where polio is still rife) to connect the knee cap to the shin bone at a particular angle has helped many polio patients walk again.

BICYCLE retailer Ray Lawler had polio 40 years ago at the age of ten. 'I have been in a wheelchair ever since, but I have lived a pretty normal life -- running my own business and having a family.

'Then five years ago everything changed. I started to feel so weak and weary that my wife Leslie had to give up work to look after me.' Finally Ray's lung muscles became so weak that he had to be put on life support.

'I really didn't expect to survive. But I was taken on a portable breathing machine to a different hospital where there was a specialist in respiratory problems like mine. After one week I was sitting up and looking at life again.'

'I think polio victims need to be warned about what might happen, so that they know to seek help. My own GP didn't understand what it was.'

For a practical guide to the late effects of polio, send four first class stamps to the Welfare Department, British Polio Fellowship, Bell Close, West End Road, Huislip, Middx HA4 6LF. The BPF offers support to people with polio on their hotline 0895 675515.

TO PUT OUT OF HEAR

