



## Dr. Henry writes about **SISTER KENNY: POLIO PIONEER**

and

[\[After the Movie\]](#)

With more and more polio survivors beginning to recall their own personal histories concerning their respective experiences with polio, there is also more interest in some of the polio pioneers who labored before the discovery of the vaccines by Salk and Sabin. One of these pioneers was Sister Elizabeth Kenny. I have always remembered her name and decided to determine if she ever wrote anything. To my surprise, she wrote an autobiography in 1943 entitled *And They Shall Walk*. The Richmond Library had one copy, and I checked it out and read the book. Based on the book, a Hollywood movie was produced in 1943. Actress Rosalind Russell portrayed Sister Kenny. [I have not seen the movie](#); but maybe some of you have.

Sister Kenny was not a Catholic sister or nun. The title of Sister was bestowed as a military rank for nurses in the Australian medical corps. She was trained to be a vocational or practical nurse. She served in the Australian medical corps during World War I, made numerous voyages between Europe and Australia on hospital ships in dangerous waters, and actually was wounded with shrapnel in one leg while serving on the front. She also had some type of heart condition which almost shortened her life. The condition was never clearly diagnosed. All of this happened before she began a long crusade to help children attacked by polio.

Her exact birthday was not revealed in her autobiography, but it seemed she was born around 1886 in New South Wales, Australia. She never married, although she allegedly had one serious love involvement. Her first exposure to polio occurred in trying to help aborigine children in the Australian bush country. Here she observed that the aborigines used hot cloths on the involved extremities. She became inspired to learn more about polio, especially in the acute phase, and developed her own ideas about the disease and its treatment.

Sister Kenny's invention of a special stretcher for the transportation of patients in shock provided her with the funds to start her own clinic for the treatment of polio victims. The stretcher was named the Sylvia Stretcher in honor of a child named Sylvia for whom the special stretcher was created. A patent was obtained and Sister Kenny earned royalties for many years.

She started her first polio clinic in 1933 in Townsville, Queensland, Australia in the yard of a home under an awning cover. She started with seventeen patients. From the start, her methods and her authoritarian personality created opposition from the medical establishment in Australia and later in England and in much of the USA. The main controversy involved her view that the most significant problem in the acute phase of polio was the spasm of the involved muscles. She advocated applying heat (hot packs) and physical therapy whereas the medical establishment at that time advocated immobilization with splinting and casting to prevent deformities.

Most medical experts, at that time, felt that the stronger muscles pulled on the weakened or paralyzed muscles, and this process caused deformities. One of the American doctors who opposed her methods was Dr. Robert Lovett, a polio specialist who had treated Franklin Roosevelt in 1921. However, Sister Kenny found a warmer reception in the US medical community than in any other country. Her opinion of the American doctor speaks for itself:

"The American doctor, in my opinion, possesses a combination of conservatism and that other quality which has put the United States in the forefront in almost every department of science - that is, an eagerness to know what it is really all about, in order that he may not be the one left behind if there is something to it. This eagerness, however, does not persuade him to abandon caution."

She found acceptance at the University of Minnesota medical center and became a guest faculty member. On one occasion, this Australian bush nurse who held no formal degree, lectured to an esteemed audience of physicians and other health professionals.

With her patients and with the families of her patients, she found almost universal acceptance. At the bedside, she was an imposing and caring figure. She had a therapeutic presence. Her confidence in her methods was so convincing that many of her patients felt so inspired that they knew that they "had better get better". She was 5'8" tall, weighed 154lb. but apparently seemed larger to children. She wore characteristic large feathered hats which some said made her look like Admiral Nelson, and she had her own therapeutic charisma. She did not seem to be deterred by opposition, and most medical authorities admitted that most patients had better outcomes with the Kenny approach to treatment than those who did not.

Her treatment involved no use of splints or casts, the application of heat with wool cloth, and treating the spasms of the muscles with physical therapy and not immobilization. She did not use muscle testing because she did not view this as therapeutic. Her hands-on therapy involved the retraining and re-education of the involved muscles; and she apparently had near miraculous results which she did not hesitate to proclaim to anyone who would listen. Apparently her methods were never subjected to true scientific investigation.

One of her uncompromising views that tended to get her into conflict with many in the medical community was her strong opinion that polio was a muscle disease and was not a disease of the central nervous system. She discouraged the use of the iron lung, but did accept the temporary necessity for the iron lung in cases of bulbar polio. Medical experts who valued her treatment methods were able to overlook her unscientific conclusions about the disease of polio and offered more acceptance and appreciation for her efforts on behalf of polio victims.

She eventually met President Roosevelt in the White House in June, 1943. Her methods were never fully endorsed by The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, but she received some support from this organization because her patients believed in her and she got good results. The National Foundation financially supported the training of Kenny therapists at the University of Minnesota. However, the Foundation refused to support The Kenny Institute. Sister Kenny died in 1952 before the announcement of the Salk vaccine in 1955. The Kenny Institute survived; and in the late 1950s, the Kenny Institute and the World Health Organization were the major supporters of continued polio research. These two groups financed polio conferences in 1959 and 1960 in which Albert Sabin announced the amazing results around the world in using his live virus vaccine which could be administered so easily. The Kenny Institute survives to this day as a part of the Abbott Northwestern Hospital complex in Minneapolis.

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## References

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## After the Movie



["Sister Kenny" \(1946\)](#) in the [Internet Movie Database \(UK\)](#). Alternative sites: [IMDb \(US\)](#), [IMDb \(Italy\)](#) and [IMDb \(Home\)](#).

I watched the Sister Kenny film yesterday, had read her autobiography last year, and wrote an article about her for my local PPS support group newsletter which some of you saw in other newsletters. Overall, I enjoyed the movie and I thought Rosalind Russell was deserving of a nomination for best actress which she did receive. I thought at least two of the children with polio were real victims, a little boy with crutches and braces and a little girl with braces. The surgical amphitheatre pictured during the confrontation between the orthopedic doctors (Dr. Brach) and Sister Kenny brought back memories of my own medical training. However, I would like to say that this movie was a Hollywood production and was not a documentary.

The doctors were definitely cast in a bad light except for Dr. MacDonnell. Sister Kenny was the heroine of the movie, but was no angelic Catholic sister. Hers was a military title. Her own country of Australia and to some extent, Great Britain, viewed her as unorthodox, unscientific, and possibly dangerous. The medical establishment did not trust her, and despite what anyone feels about the establishment, without the establishment, there would be chaos and nothing to balance new ideas. It is like an adolescent who has no firm standards exemplified by parents, and the adolescent has nothing established to rebel against and this leads to confusion and turmoil for the adolescent. So Sister Kenny needed the establishment, and she finally got a hearing here in the USA because enough doctors and patients' families saw the advantages of her treatments despite her unscientific ideas.

The main scientific conflict was her view that polio was a muscle disease and not a disease of the central nervous system. To my knowledge, there was never a conclusive scientific comparison of her methods and the other methods. It seemed that her methods brought better results. Even the March of Dimes never fully accepted her theories, but did support some of her methods.

Another problem was her own personality. She was 5 ft. 8 in. tall and weighed 154 lbs. She wore feathered hats, was imposing in statue, a forceful personality, and thus seemed like a giant to children. She was an inspiring presence. She was also not fearful of boasting about her results. She never claimed cures but may have implied it. But even *she* said as quoted in the movie when asked about her criticism of doctors, "It is easier to criticize a doctor than to be one."

I view Sister Elizabeth Kenny as a polio pioneer much as I do Eleanor Roosevelt as a Civil Rights pioneer. Both women received great criticism, both were rather large in statue, both had the courage of their

convictions and did not back down when they felt they were right.

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