

# Fighting and surviving all over again

**Patricia Rock's childhood polio returned in an unexpected way, writes**

**Thomas Moore**

**H**ad Patricia Rock been properly diagnosed when she tried to stand on her crutches again after a spell in hospital, she might still be walking. Instead she has spent more than 10 years in a wheelchair, battling against immense fatigue, muscle weakness and pain in her back.

Ms Rock is a polio survivor. The virus left her with paralysed legs at the age of two. With the help of callipers and crutches, she enjoyed 30 years of upright activity, but 12 years ago her polio returned in an unexpected way. Ms Rock is one of a number of polio survivors to develop a newly recognised syndrome called "late effects of polio", which can appear 30 or 40 years after the original attack. Doctors now believe that in about a third of polio survivors, muscles eventually become too weak to support limbs; in some more serious cases, breathing and swallowing can become an effort. Other survivors may experience fatigue only.

Ms Rock had packed her life with activity. She worked full-time as a welfare officer for a disability organisation, went on archaeological digs and excelled at wheelchair basketball. She won a number of Commonwealth paraplegic swimming medals in backstroke.

"I was a go-getter. Polio became less and less of an issue as I grew older and realised I could do most of the things able-bodied people could. I didn't have a progressive disability and, unlike some polio survivors, I didn't have any respiratory difficulties," she says.

Her life changed when she was forced to come off her crutches when she developed tennis elbow. Because of her reliance on her arms, she was admitted to hospital for intensive physiotherapy and expected to leave after a week with her elbow healed, and her crutches back under her arms. It was not to be. "Once they had got my arm confined, I had to lie on my crutches, as usual -



Patricia Rock was struck down by a syndrome linked to her childhood polio, but the doctors did not diagnose it. It is frightening not being taken seriously by the medical profession. My spine was packing up 40 years early and nobody would listen to me. Photograph: Edward Sykes

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Ms Rock was finally seen by a consultant who specialised in the care of the spine. He saw from

her posture that she had polio, but the doctors did not diagnose it. It is frightening not being taken seriously by the medical profession. My spine was packing up 40 years early and nobody would listen to me.

Dr John Shivers, consultant chest physician at Papworth Hospital, Cambridgehire, agrees. He warns that new musculoskeletal symptoms should never be ignored in polio survivors. "Not all polio survivors will experience late effects, and

but the key is on the table. At about this time a specialist in the care of the spine, Dr Edward Sykes, was consulted. He saw from her posture that she had polio, but the doctors did not diagnose it. It is frightening not being taken seriously by the medical profession. My spine was packing up 40 years early and nobody would listen to me.

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