

Polio Awareness



You may have consigned poliomyelitis to the back of your memory. That was one of the success stories of immunisation, wasn't it?

It was. After the introduction of a polio vaccine by Dr Jonas Salk 40 years ago, this horrifying disease lost its power. In Britain high levels of immunisation meant that cases of polio plummeted from nearly 4,000 in 1955 to 20 between 1985 and 1991.

But polio still has its dark side. In 1991 13 cases of polio were recorded in the UK. The following year there were 19 more.

People coming into Britain from countries without immunisation programmes accounted for some of these cases and some were related to the vaccine itself, which carries a very slight risk – not to the person vaccinated, but to others after the virus has gone through the body. One man contracted polio from a baby's nappy after the child had been vaccinated.

But the saddest sequel of the early polio epidemics is the disability survivors are still suffer. Some polio victims are still kept alive in respirators, others are disabled.

It is for them that the British Polio Fellowship has designated 1996 Polio Awareness Year. National events are planned throughout the year to highlight the work of the Fellowship in helping to

relieve the problems faced by those disabled by polio.

Another cruel legacy of the disease has been the so-called "Post-Polio Syndrome" which is thought to afflict survivors, making their later years more disabled.

Medical opinion is divided on the existence of a syndrome, and critics of it believe the signs of deterioration in some survivors are due to normal ageing.

The Fellowship bulletin recently carried out a survey of its readers to find out if there are any recognisable changes to health in later years. These were some of the main points of the survey:

- Overwhelming fatigue is the most common and often the most debilitating condition.
- It is highly likely that some deterioration over and above normal ageing will occur to those who had polio earlier in life.
- There is evidence of deterioration in the breathing muscles controlled by involuntary action.
- Hard exercise might do lasting damage to muscles already weakened by the effects of polio.
- Recovery times after relatively mild illnesses are excessive.

The average age of people responding to the survey questionnaire was 60.4 years for women and 59.6 years for men. In total 674 people were aged over 60.

From 1912, when polio was first notifiable in England and Wales, cases rose slowly. There were never more than 1,000 cases reported each year – until 1947, one of the worst epidemic years which saw 8,000 cases.

During the next decade there were repeated epidemics with about 4,500 cases a year. Between 1947 and 1958, 52,514 people caught the disease, and from 1912 until the Salk vaccine was introduced, 80,000 people had contracted polio.

Author John Neville Walsh is writing a book telling the story of people whose lives were affected by polio and that medical monster, the iron lung.

"There are still a number of people," he says "that rely on the iron lung to keep them breathing and alive."

Mr Walsh is keen to hear from any *Saga* readers who have stories of survivors, among their family or friends, who have been in an iron lung.

Mr Walsh can be reached at 8, Folkestone Court, Langley, Berkshire, SL3 8LX. Telephone 01753 582208.

Who is the longest survivor of polio in the UK?

There is one report of a lady of 83, still alive, who contracted the disease at three years of age.

If *Saga* readers know of any long-time polio survivors, please write to the medical editor, Judy Kirby at *Saga* magazine, Saga Publishing, Middelburg Square, Folkestone, Kent CT20 1AZ.

Please can I have back next week.