

## An Interview With ... Verite Reily Collins



### **Tell us a little about yourself and your polio journey**

My father served in the Royal Navy, and we were all excited when he was appointed for three years to Turkey. Istanbul was a colourful and fascinating place as a teenager, but it came to an abrupt end when I caught polio. In those days the 'Military Covenant' was taken seriously; I was flown home and sent to the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital at Stanmore (normally it was a six-month wait to get in).

My first day there, I was examined by the Great Man, Prof. Seddon - then one of greatest experts on polio. Gently he told me "you may never walk again". I told him I had no intention of staying in hospital - which annoyed him as it was his pride and joy - and he immediately passed me over to the care of his most junior doctor, J.I.P. James. Mr James and I got on like the proverbial 'house on fire'; saying "it can't hurt", we tried out different ideas, and I walked out of Stanmore.

### **When did you first realise you had PPS?**

I had a vague idea, so asked Hilary. She told me all about it, gave me enormous help, and I joined up as a member of Polio Survivors Network (PSN)

### **How did you get a diagnosis?**

Theoretically, I've never had a diagnosis from an expert - but then there doesn't seem one around in today's NHS. The NHS website has wiped polio off its pages, and now there is only information about PPS. Anyway, what Hilary has put together is good enough for me.

### **What, in your experience, is one of the larger issues facing polio survivors currently?**

Ignorance. I now call in to play acting techniques learnt at school, and when a doctor or nurse lectures me "why didn't you have the polio vaccine" I burst into crocodile tears, very loudly! I am fed up with such crass comments, and find tears the best way of putting across the fact that we caught polio before Salk produced his vaccine; my mother was so frightened of polio she would have been first in the queue if there had been a vaccine, and breathed a sigh of relief when Dad was appointed to Turkey as in those days it was supposed to be polio-free.

However, ignorance amongst nursing staff is rife, and recently I used my savings to pay for an operation privately; the Pre-Op. Assessment Nurse at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital wouldn't arrange for me to see the Anaesthetist before my op. and I was scared of a repeat of the horrendous problems I had had when an Anaesthetist from The Royal Marsden hadn't administered the correct dosages, even though I clearly remember telling her twice I had had polio. I had the operation privately, saw the anaesthetist for a good half hour a week beforehand, and sailed through it all. Worth every penny!

### **What one piece of advice would you give to other polio survivors?**

Belong to PSN. I find the Polio Matters newsletter always has two or three things I have ringed for action or to follow-up.

### **What simple change would make the NHS more user-friendly for you?**

To follow the same protocols as most European hospitals. In Europe I would phone the consultant for an appointment; here we are supposed to waste our time seeing a GP for a referral - when usually they haven't a clue. In Europe you are assumed to have a brain; in Britain the NHS is surprised we have anything between our ears. I remember the wonderful Professor Guilloff sending me off for an MRI Scan at Charing Cross, then telling me with great satisfaction that the scan showed I definitely had a brain.