

My Polio Letter

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I was born in South Africa in 1937 but grew up in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). In 1954 there was no tertiary education in Rhodesia and so the Northern (Zambia) and Southern Rhodesian Governments paid for 30 girls who had received good marks in the Cambridge exams to go to the Grahamstown Training College in South Africa.

I absolutely loved my first year, especially the sports, and was on hockey and tennis teams, passed my lifesaving exams up to the final teachers' one although I was too young to receive it. I was also having piano lessons – something I had wanted all my life. Also, I had always wanted to be a teacher.



Being so far from home, we could only go back for mid and end-of-year holidays. There were four terms and the short holidays were only 10 days. It was a long hot journey in summer and freezing cold in winter– three days in a steam train and six in a compartment. We sang happily all the way home.

Two weeks later I felt really ill and on Christmas day lay on my bed wishing I was still young enough to have toys to play with. My brothers could not understand why I was not joining them in French cricket. The next day we went into the Matopos – huge granite kopjies (hills). My younger sister got stuck and very reluctantly I had to get her down. The next day I was nagged into playing tennis and was thrilled to hit a backhand my brothers could not return.

Back home I collapsed onto my bed, paralysed. My mother fed me jelly and my father came to the door and asked me if I thought I was paralysed. How he must have regretted it.

I lost consciousness and was taken to the little hospital in Gwanda, a small town on the road to South Africa. A lumbar puncture revealed cerebral spinal meningitis. I fell out of bed that night. The next day the needle was broken in my back and I fell out of bed a second time. I could only move my left leg and I was able to use it to turn off the harsh light above my bed. My mother was not allowed to bring food, and the cold fish for breakfast was unpalatable. We were told I would die or “go mental”– our priest came and offered me communion. I asked him if he also thought I was going to die.

In those days there were strip roads in Rhodesia and low level bridges, so during the rainy season the roads were often impossible for travel. My parents made the decision to wait for the rivers to go down before sending me to Bulawayo. A man with similar problems was taken over by tractor but died. One day three teenagers visited me, even though I should have been in isolation, and my personal nurse that my mother had hired, looked after the whole hospital on New Year's Eve so the staff could go dancing.

When the roads were passable, I was taken to Bulawayo where a wing in the isolation hospital was used for polio cases. At last I knew what was wrong but had no idea of polio. A physiotherapist told me I had lost half my muscles. I told the heart specialist who had been called and was caring for the polio patients that I would play sport again. He asked me to go back to him when I did.

It was pouring with rain when, after six weeks, I was released from the hospital. I will never forget my mother's face when I walked towards her dragging my left leg and 40 pounds lighter. Worse was to come when I was put in the car and told to move over. It took a while to get them to understand I could not move. This realization was followed by lunch with friends and my inability to use my right hand.

We stayed in Bulawayo so I could have hydrotherapy in the town baths. Unaware of my limits, I jumped into the pool and thought I would drown. Worse was the school girls walking back to school and *shame* echoing down the line.

I was also having physiotherapy and so began a life of having physiotherapists as friends. One day on a walk, a young man approached me without asking if I had been sick. What a boost that was.

Back home, I was given a year to recuperate and to return to college. I swam, walked, played the piano, did tapestry and taught a child on correspondence.



We went to the coast for a holiday and stayed in a hotel. I was seated behind a pillar and the rest of the family was in the dining room. A very nice young man came and sat with me and cut up my food.

Luckily an uncle who was a physician suggested I go to the polio clinic in Salisbury (Harare) run by the Red Cross with a Mr. Nangle in charge. I was put on an overnight train but could still not dress myself – in the days when stockings were worn. There, my elbow was straightened but my shoulder left frozen. My thumb on the right hand pulled backwards, so a leather brace was made to pull my thumb into position. I was told to

use my hand or I would lose it and that when I finished at college in two years' time, I would have the tendons from my fingers transplanted into my thumb.

I went back to college not really able to write properly and the hand brace kept breaking. They told my mother I would not be able to cope but she chose not to answer so they could not just put me on the train and there were no telephones.

My lectures were arranged so I could rest for an hour in the afternoon and I managed with the help of an aunt to keep up with my projects. I gave up subjects I had gained distinctions in and took the others to make sure I passed. The needlework lecturer asked me why I had taken needlework and I had to tell her it was because she had not given me a distinction. Later, a friend did a button hole for me and it was held up for the class to admire. Further shame was that I got an A and she a C. I never cheated again. In winter, a physiotherapist kept a bucket of hot wax, and I would go up and put my hand in it before lectures started.

In my second year, I had not been allowed to play sport but now I played hockey again and did everything else determined not to be different.

For the 3rd year, I specialized in teaching infants and then in teaching the first three years. I was one of three senior students with the special task of running the chapel which I loved.

I also learnt that there are people who do not like people with handicaps. The psychology lecturer gave me an extension to finish a thesis from Friday to Monday, and then docked me a full symbol and kept the thesis.

I had permission to rest after lunch if I needed to and only asked if I was totally exhausted. One afternoon when we were gardening I asked to be allowed to rest, and the psychology lecturer taunted me so I did not go and developed a carbuncle as a result.

Another day in the botanical gardens for art and learning how to psychoanalyse childrens' drawings, the lecturer asked the girls to psychoanalyse me because of the way I held my pencil. There was dead silence so I laughed and said, "I've had polio." Back at College she stormed into the staff room and said I had told her I had polio. With one voice they all said "She has!!" Up for a distinction at the end, the lecturer chose me to play the piano and do



handwork for the inspectors – making figures from pipe cleaners. I can only assume they admired my courage, because I got my distinction.

Back in Salisbury, I had the tendons from my fingers transplanted into my thumb, and started teaching with my hand in plaster. Sadly Mr. Nangle did not realise how weak my hand was and the operation had to be repeated the following year. He gave me a hand with which I was later able to get distinctions for in embroidery and prizes for knitting. When I took some to show him many years later he cried as he said he never saw his successes - only his failures.

I taught for two happy years and then married Laurie in 1960. The first time I was pregnant, I had a miscarriage. We later had two sons with no problems. After the second one was born, I put on the weight I had lost seven years previously. With my next pregnancy, I felt very unwell and aborted. The DNC's I had after that caused intense backaches which have never left me. With my next pregnancy I had to be very careful and the birth was a nightmare. Just as they were about to do surgery our third son arrived.

My husband was retrenched in 1974, and the only job I could get was to teach music. My 'polio' hand is like a loose fist, so for five years, I taught 14 junior primary classes playing with the knuckles on my right hand. No one thought it was difficult. My backache now was serious and, besides physiotherapy, I had cortisone injections in my spine.

Trying to find a physician to help me after our physician had been killed in a car crash, I went to the pain clinic at a large Durban hospital and was given hormones and told to swim. I was in an awful state, allergic to the hormones, and ended up with the hospice physician and on valium and morphine with awful side effects.

Worst was that nobody believed I was ill. My mother and sister would not give me the help I needed. My mother never accepted the polio and after 40 years was still accusing me for getting it. I was sad as I loved her dearly.

At this stage, my son in England saw an article in the paper, "The tragic results of the polio epidemic." What a relief to know of post-polio and join the British Polio Fellowship and Post-Polio Health International (PHI). Joan Headley, Executive Director of PHI, also put me in touch with Denis Hogan in New Zealand. He was marvelous, providing me with reams of information and answering any queries immediately. From then on, the newsletter was to guide any treatment I had.

When the post-polio clinic opened at St. Thomas' Hospital in London, I was able to go and was put on the correct medicine and told to put on a brace and wear it always. I returned two years later to have my medicine adjusted.

We started a post-polio group and I spoke on the health programme on Radio South Africa. We went to Cape Town where there was to be a launch of polio vaccine through Africa. Top medical men, including the medical officer for health in Africa based in Harare, and the top Rotary people were also there.

I was there with my neck and hand braces in my motorised wheelchair. A young black man with leg braces also took part. We were attended by very fit soccer players and were speaking to a packed audience of coloured people, many of whom had strange beliefs about the polio vaccine.

I told them there had not been a vaccine for me and that scooters were very expensive and then the young black man told them how his calipers were always breaking and how awful it had been having to be carried upstairs at school and not to do any sport. We were warmly thanked and the whole hall, parents and children were vaccinated.

Now I have the right medical people looking after me. I have been in a motorized wheelchair since 1976. The bones in my neck are worse than ever so I wear a neck brace permanently – hard in the daytime and soft at night. I have weak breathing muscles, and so I am on a BiPAP machine for 10 hours a day. Before I used it, I had the most terrible headaches and was having blackouts. The last time I had a blackout, I fell and had to have six stitches between my eyes.

We have been happily married for 54 years now. I have given up playing bridge and other things that require holding my head up for a long time. But I play on the computer, do jigsaw puzzles, love reading and do the alma mater newsletter and website for the College. I still do embroidery, and the eye specialist gives me embroidery glasses so I do not have to have a magnifying glass round my neck. I also knit.

We live in a retirement village which means the lawns are cut and outside windows washed. I have a maid who I have been training to be a carer and recently, after breaking a hip and my left hand, she was very helpful. Our church is very much part of my life, and I try to do pastoral work for the older and lonely.

I spoke to a large group about polio and the response was tremendous. Many mothers needed the information. Like my mother, they had listened



to the old wives tales. I have had an article published in our local paper and two in Australia. I have spoken to and thanked Rotary. Among other books, I have found Lauro Halstead's very helpful and keep the physicians supplied with all the latest literature from Post-Polio Health International.

Vitamin D has given me surprisingly strong bones, but I have a serious potassium shortage and have to get medicine from New Zealand. They do not make the effervescent one here.

I am grateful that our grandchildren see wheelchairs as fun. When one was 3 years old, he asked me if I had to wear my neck brace for ever. When I said, "yes," he said, "Everyone has problems." We learned his grandfather's teasing was his problem! I have often quoted that. Later, aged 9, when we went to a dolphin show, he was walking behind my wheelchair as he always did. When we entered the arena, all the seats for disabled people were full. In a loud voice he asked, "Can't you read?" You have never seen seats empty so quickly or officials appear so suddenly.