

From Henry's Desk by Henry Holland

Abuse and Polio Patients

Over the years some have written that polio patients encountered significant abuse from medical and nursing staff members, physical therapists and even family members during the time of acute polio and during the months and years of rehabilitation. I will attempt to write about this sensitive topic and my opinions will be just that, opinions. First I will define abuse as found in the Merriam Webster Dictionary:

abuse

Pronunciation: &-'byüs

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English, from Middle French *abus*, from Latin *abusus*, from *abuti* to consume, from *ab-* + *uti* to use

Date: 15th century

1 : a corrupt practice or custom

2 : improper or excessive use or treatment : **MISUSE**

3 *obsolete* : a deceitful act : **DECEPTION**

4 : language that condemns or vilifies usually unjustly, intemperately, and angrily

5 : physical maltreatment

In regard to polio patients, some have written about improper or excessive use of treatment or physical maltreatment. Also these writers have written about sexual and psychological abuse or trauma to polio patients. The most prolific writers about this abuse have been Drs. Nancy Frick and Richard Bruno. These writers are not medical doctors themselves, but hold doctorates in other areas. Their conclusions are based on surveys and some personal testimonies from polio survivors. The reader can find one of their articles on the Internet at:

<http://members.aol.com/harvestctr/Library/frick.html>

This particular article alleges that polio patients developed so called "Type A" personalities and were overachievers in trying to be normal. There may be some truth to these theories, but I feel that some understanding of the historical times and some psychodynamic considerations have to be considered before projecting so much of this alleged abuse on physicians, nurses, physical therapists, and family members. My own memory and many polio survivors with whom I have talked, do not feel that they were abused, but are grateful for the care they received. Historically polio was feared by the parental generation because polio was indiscriminate in its random selection of victims and there was no absolute protection. During the summer months, polio compared to other serious infectious diseases, received an inordinate amount of attention from public health departments, the medical community, the national and local press and from public service clubs. The reason for this concern and attention was largely due to the reality that the majority of polio patients were children and this disease could be both fatal and crippling. The greatest national epidemic of polio occurred in 1952 with nearly 60,000 reported cases and the greatest epidemic in Virginia was in 1950 with 1200 reported cases.

I think one has to consider the immediate treatments for acute polio and the rehab treatments administered for years after polio. The usual acute treatments involved the Kenny hot packs which

when initially applied to the involved parts of the body might illicit some short term pain because of the heat. After a few minutes the hot packs were usually soothing. More painful was the vigorous application of physical therapy. This therapy was intended to prevent contractures in the joints of the extremities and to help retrain weakened muscles. The stretching necessary to achieve the desired results was usually very painful and would often evoke cries of pain or simple weeping. Most polio patients would try to endure this "treatment" in a stoical manner because this therapy often seemed to bring about the desired results.

Depending on one's age this physical therapy treatment might be perceived as abuse because it was painful. A child who could understand the purpose of the physical therapy would probably be better able to accept this treatment than a child much younger. The ordeal of isolation might be perceived as abuse because of the separation from loved ones and the care being provided by total strangers who might be perceived as aloof and uncaring. Once out of isolation most polio survivors that I have interviewed remember caring and empathic nurses and staff. In my memory most of the nursing staff were relatively young, encouraging, optimistic and upbeat. While on the polio ward at MCV I kept an autograph book as most of the other patients did. Below are a few entries. These entries communicate encouragement, optimism and some humor.

Keep looking forward Henry, you'll soon be up walking again
Ann Harrell

Richmond, Va, October 15, 1950

Dear Henry,

It was just you to be so pleasant at all times. Keep on keeping on.

Mrs. Therla Hall P.N. (This nurse was African American)

11/16/50, Medical College of Virginia

To Henry

One of the nicest and sweetest patients I've ever had.

Keep your chin up and "Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think!"

Marian Brantley (signed with stick figure with red hair)

11/16/50

Dear Henry, (This nurse was African American)

Hope you will get "Well Soon."

Miss B. V. Taylor P.N.

M.C.V. 5th floor

Remember me well

Remember me long

Remember when

You are well & strong

P.S. Don't be too long

Josephine Marie Murphy

Lynchburg, Va.

Nurse figure to the right wearing glasses with
caption saying, "Hey Henry – How about eating
that egg?"

Dec 6, 1950

12/6/50

I like you so much – I hope the best things in life happen to you – You sure have been a lovely patient.
Best wishes for a speedy recovery the rest of the way.
Mary Tomlin

M.C.V., Oct. 17, 1950

To a very sweet and wonderful patient, I wish all the luck in the world:
Here's hoping your stay here will be a very short one.
Your nurse
Mrs. Bryant R.N.

Dec. 12, 1950

Dear Henry,
It's been grand knowing you, even though you are kind'a mean. Hope I see you soon in something besides striped pajamas!
Best of luck always. You deserve it. Don't forget me.
Love, Gertie
Gertie Blow, Goldsboro, N.C.

It is interesting to note that nurses were recruited from other parts of Virginia or surrounding states as indicated by two of the autographs above. There was a nursing shortage in many locations where epidemics occurred. 1950 was an epidemic year for Virginia and newspaper articles report that nurses were recruited from surrounding states. In 1950 the MCV hospitals were racially segregated, but African-American nurses, graduates of the St. Philip Nursing School, were working on all white polio wards as evidenced by two of the autographs above.

I am of the opinion that the vast majority of nursing personnel on polio wards wanted to be there and provided compassionate care. Many misperceptions probably occurred, often the result of simple personality factors and differences. Also the patients were congregated in wards where there was some community spirit and identity. Intentional Individual abuse would have been difficult to accomplish unobserved. I am aware that there were exceptions and I have interviewed a few female polio survivors who were sexually abused as adolescent girls. They felt helpless against sexual abuse. Sexual abuse of female children and adolescents was under reported in the polio years, but there was also a different moral tone in the nation at that time. Issues of right and wrong were more clearly defined in the mores of our culture.

The philosophy of "no pain, no gain" was an often spoken and/or unspoken motivating resolve that many polio patients of reason could adopt. The desire to get back on one's feet was also a strong motivator. Accomplishing this goal often meant that the polio survivor would be able to return to school and participate in the world beyond the front door steps. Those who tried steadfastly to get out of wheel chairs and ultimately failed were at a distinct disadvantage in the culture of the mid twentieth century. Some of these polio survivors had to overcome some feelings of guilt and failure. They wondered whether they had tried hard enough to "overcome" polio. Fortunately, most of them in time were able to enter the world again in their wheel chairs. In retrospect I was fortunate. I walked out of MCV Hospital with two braces and crutches and re entered public school a year later.

Some of you reading this may feel that you were victims of abuse during your younger polio years, but I am more hopeful that most of you recall doctors, nurses, physical therapists, family members and friends who were positive, encouraging, supportive and loving.