

Saga Magazine - August 1996

HERE'S HEALTH 2

# Polio Survivors Tell How They Have Fared

**H**ow many long-term survivors of polio are there in the UK? When I asked the question in the May issue for news of the oldest survivor I did not expect the hefty postbag I received - 145 letters!

It seems that one of the most disabling illnesses this century has been bravely borne by many people, and some have made it into their nineties.

The oldest polio victim we have heard about is Mrs Jessie May Frean, who is the mother of reader Dr David Frean, of Lichfield, Staffordshire. Mrs Frean is nearly 104. She was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1892 and became ill with polio when she was five years old. She lives in her own home in Pretoria, South Africa, and carers send detailed reports by E-mail to her son in England.

Dr Frean and his wife Margaret have just visited his mother and report her in good health. "She made a complete recovery from polio and did not suffer much disability," says Dr Frean.

The oldest survivor living in the UK that we heard about was Mrs Daisy Stemp, who is 99. A friend wrote to say that although widowed and now frail, she still knits coloured blankets for orphanages in developing countries.

Some interesting stories of medical treatment emerged from readers' letters. Mrs Eileen Allen of Pontefract, West Yorkshire, believes she

was one of the first polio patients to have a limb lengthened by breaking a bone.

Mrs L. M. Sharp of Ilkeley, who is 90, typed her letter telling us of her experiences with polio, known as Infantile Paralysis when she suffered from it aged three in 1909. When she finally started school, she writes... "I remember being terrified of meeting people as I had been isolated for so long."

In 1924 an orthopaedic surgeon operated to relieve her disabilities. "It was very painful," she says, "my legs were cut from ankle bone round the back of the leg to the other side of the ankle and knots tied in the tendons at the back of the leg to give me more elasticity in walking. It improved my walking considerably and I could do without the calipers."

A few years ago a consultant told her that this technique had not been improved upon and was still used.

**R**eaders have mastered a variety of aids for the disabled, but built-up shoes can be a problem. Mrs Joan Watkins, of Swanage, who believes she had polio as a child although it was never properly diagnosed, has tried to avoid the surgical boot but cannot find an attractive shoe which gives her some lift.

"I persevere trying to find suitable shoes with a two-and-a-half-inch heel," she writes. "There was a Hush Puppy style in the 1980s which was

ideal, but it was discontinued." Last year Marks & Spencer did the "best and cheapest" but, sadly, it is out of production.

"Shoes with the type of heel I require are impossible to find. Suggestions that the heel can be built up are useless - it throws out the balance of the arch."

Can Mrs Watkins get a shoe to fit? "Any help will be welcome," she says.

Some readers felt they were suffering from "Post-Polio Syndrome", covered in

our earlier article, but many others disclaimed any lingering problems with disabilities.

Mrs Doreen Mackie summed it up nicely when she said, describing herself and her daughter-in-law, also a polio survivor: "The disease has not stopped either of us from leading a full and varied life. As for this Post-Polio Syndrome, I think we'll just forget about it."

### BABYSITTERS BEWARE

*Reader Jo Smith, a nurse and health visitor, has a word of warning for babysitting grandparents who may have to change the nappy of a newly-immunised baby.*

*"They are exposed to live vaccine if they are changing a newly immunised baby," she writes. The danger of contracting the disease this way can be removed by wearing protective gloves.*

### BRITISH POLIO FELLOWSHIP

The British Polio Fellowship is the only national charity caring solely for people living in the British Isles who have been disabled by polio. You can contact them at Ground Floor Unit A, Eagle Office Centre, The Runway, South Ruislip, Middlesex, HA4 6SE. Tel: 0181 842 1898. Fax: 0181 842 0555. If writing for information, please remember to enclose a stamp for your reply, they are a charity.