

Unprotected People #5

Polio

“I awoke one morning unable to walk”

One day, 3-year-old Sharon Karber awoke unable to walk. It was 1953. Polio had reached epidemic proportions in the United States, and Sharon had become another polio victim. This is her personal story, which originally appeared in Michigan Immunization Update, Spring 1997. It is entitled, “Through a child’s eyes: a child’s polio experience.” As Sharon says, “this is a true story told through the eyes of one child who experienced a crippling vaccine-preventable disease and was rehabilitated. Not everyone was as lucky.” Today, Ms. Karber, a registered nurse, is a nurse consultant at the Michigan Department of Community Health. Here is her story:

Through a child’s eyes: a child’s polio experience

For me and my family, the crippling effects of polio will never be forgotten. It was the spring of 1953, and a polio epidemic was occurring in Michigan and the rest of the country. During that year, 2,346 polio cases were diagnosed in Michigan, and, at almost three years of age, I became one of those statistics. I awoke one morning unable to walk and had to be admitted to Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Rapids, where I spent the next seven months.

I recall seeing my parents through a glass door during my stay at the hospital. As I learned later in life, polio patients were quarantined in order to both protect the polio patients from acquiring respiratory infections from visitors and in order to contain the spread of polio to those with whom they might have contact. Eventually it became normal to see my parents only on weekends because they had to travel two hours, one way, to see me. Rehabilitation therapy during those seven months included hot packs to my legs, whirlpool treatments, passive leg exercises and learning to walk with braces and crutches. I was discharged from Mary Free Bed Hospital after seven months of therapy under the

condition that my mother would continue to administer my leg exercises. This meant that three times a day she would place me on the kitchen table and massage, stretch and strengthen my leg muscles.

Grade school years were very difficult because of my braces and crutches. It was impossible to run and play like other kids. I required leg surgeries (including four weeks in a cast) every summer until I was 12 years old in order to correct deformities, reposition muscles, and reattach tendons for better leg and foot control. Eventually I graduated from needing braces and crutches, but then came the mismatched orthopedic saddle shoes. I remember pleading with my mother to buy me regular shoes but the answer was always “no,” because the shoes had to be orthopedically built and had to accommodate a two shoe-size difference in foot size.

Junior high school was my first normal school experience. I had at last reached my maximum ability where nothing further could be done to improve the functioning of my legs. I was now able to compete in gym class, wear normal shoes, and cheerlead with the best of my peers. My residual physical limitations were minimal, but what a long road I had traveled with that polio villain!

My experience with this disease was nothing compared to what my parents endured seeing their child go through years of physical limitations and rehabilitation. Until the day my mother died, tears would always come to her eyes when she told her side of this story. To write my story now, as an adult and as a mother, makes my heart ache for my mother, who suffered emotionally because of my disease. Physically losing parenting responsibilities of her youngest child and then having that once-normal child return physically disabled from a disease that a vaccine could have prevented (had it been discovered earlier) caused terrible guilt for her. I strongly

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believe my rehabilitation and level of functioning today would not have been possible without her unending devotion in performing my daily leg exercises, compliance with years of physician visits and consents for numerous surgeries.

Today, I have my own family and am a nurse consultant for the Michigan Department of Community Health working with the Immunization Division. My life has come full circle as I now spend much of my time as a strong advocate for immunizations. I believe the work I do to educate health care providers

in Michigan about the importance of vaccinating all children on time will help prevent potentially devastating diseases. It is my hope that no child will ever have to suffer any disease that can be prevented by vaccines. This is a true story told through the eyes of one child who experienced a crippling vaccine-preventable disease and was rehabilitated. Not everyone was as lucky.

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