**POLIO IN MORAY**

I joined Elgin Rotary earlier this year. I’ve known many of Rotary’s members for years; I knew they did great community projects like the Bothy Ballads, the Fireworks Night, Marafuns and, generally, good works for charities, local and national.

What I didn’t know was that for the last 32 years, Rotary International has raised millions – more than two thousand millions! – of dollars, for the worldwide Polio Eradication Programme, and that by the end of 2020 the world was hoping to be celebrating ‘Polio no More’.

In August this year, Africa was certified free from wild Poliovirus, and it is only currently still endemic in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Polio is only the second disease to be eradicated (the other, smallpox) in human history.

By any measure, this is a hugely commendable achievement in which to be involved.

Rotary has been meeting by Zoom since March, and at one such virtual session, there was a discussion on preparations for World Polio Day on 24th October. Interested, I wondered aloud how severely polio had affected our local Elgin Community before vaccination campaigns began, and-of course-was promptly invited to do some research, on behalf of the Club.

I have done so, in an increasingly steep learning curve, through hospital archives, old newspaper reports in the Courant and the Northern Scot, and by speaking to an extraordinary group of ‘polio survivors’, some of whom had got in touch with me following Sarah Rollo’s article in the Northern Scot, others by word-of-mouth contact (and not necessarily local). This essay is my reflections on what I had naively volunteered myself into.

I have a singular memory of polio from childhood; in my Primary 2 class in Cambuslang, (near Glasgow) our teacher advised us one morning of the sad death of a classmate, a wee boy of six. The year was 1952. In all my remaining 12 years of school, no other classmates ever died, of anything. We had measles a-plenty, sometimes mumps, whooping cough, chickenpox, appendices removed and ice-cream-and-jelly if you lost your tonsils. I remember children with calipers and weak limbs, and I certainly remember the respectful adult fear in which polio was discussed. In my Cambuslang neighbourhood was a boy with a wooden leg, one leg lost to polio, but he was in a rough gang and my nice gang were scared of them, so we didn’t play with him.

Polio struck the whole country badly in 1947, the epidemic dying down by 1949/50; then struck again in 1954-58; 1947 was the worst year. There were 1,424 cases in Scotland in that year, and 7,800 in England and Wales. Just as we measure Covid-19 now in terms of rate of infection per 100,000 population, so then; Scotland’s rate was 28 per 100,000 (England’s was 18, much less, the reasons why unclear). Some areas of Scotland were virtually unaffected, like the Borders and the Highlands, neighbouring Banffshire, and even Dundee City; but the County of Moray and Nairn was badly hit. Its rate was up at 100 per 100,000, well above the national average. There were 52 cases that year in Moray (one in Nairn) clustered around Elgin, Lossiemouth, Forres and Rothes. There had been no cases in the 16 years before 1947.

As nationally, Moray suffered two periods of outbreaks, the first 1947-1950 (91 cases); the second 1954-58 (48 cases). 1958, like 1947, was a bad year, with 20 cases, but only two cases were ‘notified’ between 1959 and 1963, and since then, none.

It is a horrible disease. To quote from Rotary’s information “*Poliovirus invades the nervous system and can cause total paralysis in hours. It can strike people of any age but mainly affects children under five. Polio can be prevented by vaccines, but it is not curable”*

In 1950, Moray’s Medical Officer of Health, Dr Ian Monro, submitted a paper to the Institute of Public Health, assessing what had happened in Moray and Nairn in the first three years of the 1947 outbreak. It’s very academic, very meticulous, carefully anonymous of his 70 cases, although you can tell he knows exactly where everyone lived, and their circumstances. I liked Dr Monro’s style : clearly a no-nonsense and stern advisor to the local councillors, the Northern Scot reports him telling Committee Members that one case was brought into Moray by a family fleeing from a suspected outbreak in Banffshire, of which “he took a dim view”. And being in the immediate aftermath of the War, he talks of the virus “making a commando raid” into Lossiemouth. At the very end of his report is this remarkable statement:

*“…. Poliomyelitis is relatively lacking in infective power. This view receives strong support from the fact that during the height of the outbreak in 1947, when a score or more cases were in hospital and new ones being frequently admitted, none of the staff of the isolation hospital – medical, nursing, domestic or outside – was affected by the disease…. I myself was the only casualty.”*

Extraordinary. I don’t know what age Dr Monro would have been in 1947, but his statistics show that by far the majority of polio cases were children under 15; only one-in-eight cases nationally were adults over 25 years old. Polio was widely known as “infantile paralysis” and, in fact, Northern Scot reports never referred to it as polio. In Scotland as a whole, 40% of all cases were infants of under school age, but in Moray for some reason there were proportionately more older cases; Dr Monro didn’t know why.

When polio struck, it could turn a family’s life upside down within days, sometimes hours. I spoke to three people who have memories of the local 1940s outbreaks; they are all now, of course, in their seventies. Those who were parents then are probably mostly gone, and we have only the recollections of those they talked to. I got the strong impression that polio was something that was not talked openly about, between parent and growing-up child, between adults, and between children, including siblings. No doubt a continuation of war-time attitude to grief and difficulties, people “*just got on with it* ”; but it must have been indescribably heart-rending to hand a child over to the care of a hospital ward, with visiting discouraged and timescales completely open-ended. One of my interviewees was told in later life, by an aunt *“I went to the hospital with you both; you were crying and screaming not to be left; your mum was crying her heart out”*.

When a child was diagnosed, they were hospitalised to ‘fever isolation ward’ hospitals like Spynie in Elgin, Culduthel in Inverness, the City Hospital in Aberdeen; while Stracathro, south of Aberdeen, was used for long-term rehabilitation. Quite apart from the panic of diagnosis of infantile paralysis, there was little that parents could do : visit occasionally, maybe once a week, often less; send parcels of treats, or toys, or ‘things to do’, but they could only see their child through the window. In all cases, that was the enduring memory : the window visit.

Those ‘polio survivors’ that I spoke to were all young – infants – when they went to hospital. They don’t remember the particular trauma of hospital admission; they don’t remember being in pain with their paralysis; one poor child entered hospital paralysed from the neck down; they remember exercises, exercises. I was struck by how warmly all spoke of their carers and nurses in their sometimes months-long stays, with one being told in later years that she apparently didn’t want to leave her ‘new family’, while others felt they came home changed, looking and speaking differently. Local neighbourhoods and churches and schools often kept in touch with their ‘lost child’ and would send parcels and messages, but children weren’t allowed to take their toys or dolls back home.

That cannot have been a universal experience. I read an article on-line by the renowned journalist, Patrick Cockburn, who endured 10 months in hospital away from his family home in Cork, Ireland. He was six; he pined for his family, as his parents did for him, and he has very few happy memories of his enforced stay, and of the rigid care system. I wince at the thought of only being able to see parents through a window.

Most children survived, and adjusted to their lives with calipers, withered limbs, ungainly gaits. Two people told me of the joy of discarding these calipers around 11 or 12 years of age. One survivorwas a victim of the rarer pre-war polio outbreaks, and her family allowed me to write of her personally. Marjorie – but known as Mabel – Phimister, was born in 1921 and contracted polio in 1929. She spent all her childhood years with what she called a ‘withered’ leg, and actually looked forward to reaching 21, the age at which she could instruct amputation, and be fitted with an artificial leg. Mabel seems to have been a remarkable woman, raising a family, living to age 89; she was a well-known character in Elgin, where she lived, and where she worked, almost all her earlier and later life in Strachan’s butcher shop. Her son, Neil, told me she was determinedly of the ‘just get on with it’ attitude, learning to drive at 65 and manning stalls for polio charities at the Lossie Raft Races till well into her retirement years.

Polio survivors seemed to develop a strong will, to see them through life. One, a contemporary of my brother’s, became a junior table tennis champion, then a Reverend in a particularly demanding ministry. I got the feeling polio survivors had to be extra-resilient, and that they still are, in their seventies. One person I spoke to actually went through the ‘iron lung‘ treatment (officially called a “respirator”, used to revive lung strength); she, fortunately, has no memory of it, but if you ‘google’ iron lung, you will see the grotesque machine and how it worked, and understand the fear of polio.

Fatalities happened of course, as my six-year old classmates were solemnly told; when it did, it sent a chill through communities and schools. Back then polio’s contagiousness was little known and, like coronavirus now, people and public authorities reacted as best they could, but there was fear and suspicion of it spreading. Children, the authorities advised, were better off sitting in school classrooms, rather than running about at home getting breathless; no cinemas; avoid travelling. And, like today, there was a wariness of incoming holiday-makers, and of any visitors from ‘infected’ areas.

And then, there was the long road to recovery : annual check-ups, adjustments to fittings, hospital appointments. One of my interviewees wrote a beautifully descriptive paragraph of how she would be recalled each year to Dr.Gray’s Hospital Outpatients, waiting long hours among patients *“ranged along the green terrazzo-tiled corridors”*; the knee-tap tests, the pin to the toe, the starch white staff looking down, and seldom a word from the orthopaedic surgeon; feeling intimidated and humiliated.

Vaccination campaigns commenced in 1956 and by the late 50s and early 1960s were being rigorously applied to all children in schools. In 1961, Dr Dewar, then Moray’s Medical Office of Health, in the style of his predecessor, pulled no punches : *“While parents are keen to have their children done,”* he said *“they are not willing to take the trouble to protect themselves.”* Perhaps attitudes changed when vaccination changed from injection to the famous “sugar lump”, in 1962. Half of Moray and Nairn’s population was fully vaccinated by 1964.

The campaigns were successful. Moray was clear of polio by the 1970s, and the whole of the UK by 1982. In 1988 the campaign to eradicate polio worldwide was commenced; it’s taken 32 years : a momentous achievement.

What happened in Moray in the late 1940s and mid 1950s, was as bad as any outbreak of polio anywhere in the country, but in 1947 in particular, was significantly worse. Why that should have been so is not clear : Banffshire and Invernessshire did not suffer nearly so badly, and pre-1947, Moray and Nairn were relatively free of outbreaks.

It must have been a very anxious time. Communities were closer-knit then; everybody knew everybody, and the fear of polio translated into a stigma. Often when I was reading newspaper reports of the times, I had a chill of recognition of how we now, in 2020, are reacting to Covid-19; but the fierceness of quarantine back then – children held for months in isolation wards – bears no relation to what we are asked to do with quarantining children today for suspected Covid. It must have been traumatic, for children and for parents; it must have required great reserves of resilience. I witnessed that resilience in the most fleeting of glimpses with my interviews with survivors; they are a noble band of brothers and sisters.

I must thank those who helped me on my steep learning curve; from Rotary, George Duthie and Alistair and Sheila Campbell, directed me to archives, and to the people to contact : the Council’s Library (Heritage) Service, Sharon Slater; in Grampian Health Board archives in Aberdeen, Fiona Musk and Gillian Winter; and at Dr Gray’s, Eilidh Mclean.

Sarah Rollo of the Northern Scot actually came up with the idea of an article inviting people to get in touch with me, then wrote the article, then searched out old newspaper reports. She was invaluable.

And profound thanks to those who made introductions for me and to those who actually spoke about their experiences, sometimes at the emotional cost of dragging up sad memories. I call them ‘survivors’ and I hope that is a respectful word to use. In fact, some still suffer effects and in the last fifteen years or so, Post Polio Syndrome is officially recognised as a diagnosis. It is as if, in the words of the UNICEF/Rotary ‘Global Eradication Initiative’, polio *‘can be prevented, but is not curable*’. We have to stay vigilant, and keep immunisation programmes going.

I will send this “tribute” to them and offer my intermediary contact if any wish to meet or speak to the others who confided in confidence to me.

The last word goes to my daughter, Jennifer, who spent a year working as a physiotherapist in Cambodia in 2004. *There were young adult polio sufferers around,* she told me; *thirty years before, under the horrific Khmer Rouge regime, immunisation programmes stopped, and polio quickly got a hold again, for years.*

There is a chance, after this amazing campaign, polio will never be seen again, here or worldwide.

For those interested in making contact with fellow survivors, I was given these details:

The British Polio Fellowship – Freephone 08000431933 or at 01923 889 501 or at [www.britishpolio.org.uk](http://www.britishpolio.org.uk)

Scottish Region British Polio Fellowship – [leydenpat@gmail.com](mailto:leydenpat@gmail.com)

Aberdeen Branch British Polio Fellowship – Ernie Strachan (Chair) 01975 571 276

Scottish Post Polio Network – sppn.org.uk