

Polio: Survivors of past epidemics face late effects

October is Polio Awareness Month. Polio Australia, along with the state polio networks, is seeking to raise awareness of the issues facing many survivors of polio in Australia even today. Our theme for this year is "Polio Survivors: Still Here, Resilient and Fighting On", highlighting the struggles of Late Effects of Polio (LEoP) that plague many survivors who are choosing to bravely confront the widespread ignorance about their condition and the inadequacy of resources having the potential to help them out. To find out more about the Late Effects of Polio and Polio Awareness Month, go to www.polioaustralia.org.au or contact us on 03 9016 7678.

There is plenty of talk about polio at the moment, especially with the recent outbreaks in London and New York. Across the world, vaccination efforts have almost – but not quite – eliminated this devastating virus from the globe.

Polio, often known as infantile paralysis, was one of the most-feared diseases of the twentieth century. It swept the country for 40 years, in epidemics that saw thousands of Australian children hospitalised or placed into quarantine. And its effects were cruelly arbitrary, bringing permanent paralysis or even death to some children, committing some to months or years in an iron lung, and leaving others relatively unscathed.

Decades later, many who lived through these outbreaks – even those who had a mild case of polio at the time, or were perhaps unaware that they had been infected – experience a cluster of symptoms known as Late Effects of Polio. Symptoms can include debilitating fatigue, muscle weakness and pain, sleep disturbances, cold intolerance, breathing difficulty, voice fatigue, and swallowing disorders. While it's most common for symptoms to arise in people who had a more severe illness at the time of infection, we now know that anyone who contracted the virus is at some risk.

There is little knowledge of LEoP across the health sector and those living with the condition are often faced with exorbitant medical expenses, first to diagnose, and then to manage the symptoms. They often have the additional cost of mobility aids and equipment to help maintain their quality of life, as many are now over 65 years of age and not eligible for the NDIS.

In response to the recent polio outbreaks, Gillian Thomas OAM, Polio Australia's President and a polio survivor herself, encourages, "Please get vaccinated; polio survivors like myself don't want any child to experience what we experienced. Polio is only a plane ride away from returning to Australia."

Polio Australia provides education and resources for both health professionals and polio survivors. For more information, see www.polioaustralia.org.au. Polio Australia encourages polio survivors to join our Australian Polio Register www.australianpolioregister.org.au, attend an information session in your area <https://www.polioaustralia.org.au/community-information-sessions/> and for health professionals to learn more at www.poliohealth.org.au.

Media contact:

Devalina Bhattacharjee
devalina@polioaustralia.org.au
0466 718 222