

# we weekend extra



## Falling down all over again

A young lad with a cheeky grin is at the open window, one arm waving exuberantly, the other gripping to the window as though he's charged over in a hurry and skidded to a halt to catch that friend passing by. But this is 1952 and this is not the whole picture, writes MARGARET LINLEY

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THE BEST OF WEEKEND ACTION IN OUT AND ABOUT, INSIDE



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MAIN

# Nightmare of polio's return

A YOUNG lad with a cheeky grin is at the open window, one arm waving exuberantly, the other gripping the edge of the window as though he's charged over in a hurry and skidded to a halt to catch that friend passing by.

He's on the cusp of manhood, full of bravado, his shirt open at the neck, his thick wavy hair has a character-building cowlick and his laughing eyes make crinkles in his skin.

His sleeves are rolled up — perhaps the camera caught him while he is working?

Who's he waving to? Likely a pretty girl, maybe a gaggle of them. What's he thinking? Life's grand, bring it on.

But look again and see the iron bedstead behind his head.

Note that this is 1952.

Remember this is a time marked by terror; when parents lived in fear as stories emerged of healthy children being put to bed at night and paralysed by morning.

This is the time when the polio epidemic swept the country, the virus arriving unannounced, often at night, and only later, on reflection, would those afflicted remark at the blinding headache that was the usual precursor.

Look again at our young lad. His exuberance and his vigour don't tell the story.

This is Owen Bourke. He's not yet 18 in this photo. He'll go on to father nine children including Damian, Cats captain from 1987 until 1989.

Owen will dispense justice on the Colac-Geelong court circuit as a stipendiary magistrate after years doing the same in the Melbourne's western suburbs.

And 60 years later, he'll have notched up 54 years of marriage to Pat, a Sacred Heart girl to his St Joseph's heart.

But right now, at the time of the photo, young Owen is well into his second year in the Geelong Hospital. He lies flat on his back in a Thomas splint, a metal contraption looking more like a medieval instrument of torture than an aid to health.

Owen had arrived home from football in Ballarat just shy of his 17th birthday. It had been a good game, and Owen — the 193cm ruckman — went to bed that night, worn out but happy.

He couldn't know, when he wandered through the house in the dead of night looking for painkillers for a blinding headache, it would be the last walk he would take unaided, ever. He couldn't know that by morning his right leg would be paralysed, that his football career was over, that he would spend two years in hospital.

He hadn't heard of polio so when the doctor came for a home visit and told his parents, within earshot

**Margaret LINLEY**



of Owen, it was either polio or a clot on the brain, the young lad barracked for a polio diagnosis.

"I'd never heard the word before but I had heard of a clot and I didn't want that," Owen, now 78, of Hamlyn Heights, said.

Looking back at the photo of him as a young man, he remembers the tourist bus heading down Ryrie St and doing a U-turn to get the shot; the photo running in this paper the next day. He's as philosophical now as he was then.

"It made you learn to be patient," he said of the debilitating disease. "You couldn't dwell on it. I read a lot. I read everything the hospital had on history. I loved history. I learned to weave. Life was very much different (after contracting polio)."

After almost two years in the Geelong Hospital he was moved to a military hospital in Kew where he stayed while calipers were measured and made for him.

Then he went home, a different person, stripped of his athleticism, robbed of his youth and with 'whatever muscle (I) had left'.

"The hardest thing then was getting employment," Owen said. "They'd ask, 'what's wrong with you?' and when you'd say polio, they'd say, 'we'll get in touch', and they never did."

Eventually he scored a job in the public service and with study at night qualified in law.

Along the way "Pat chased me until I caught her", he started the Geelong Archery Club and won gold and silver in state championships.

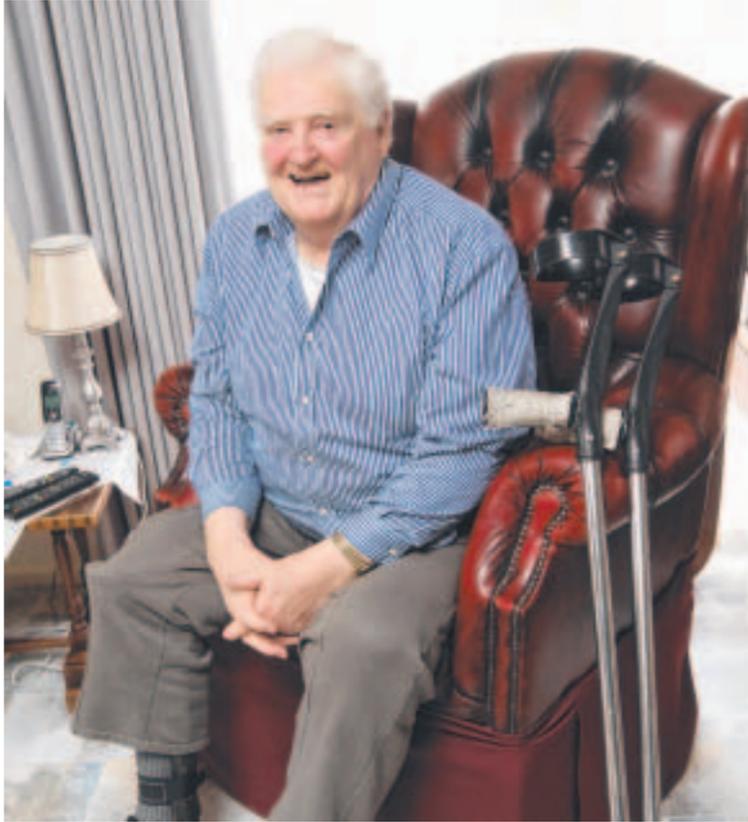
Owen is still a big man and, at 78, there are plenty of hints of the young lad in the window: a booming laugh, that cheeky grin, a decent head of hair.

Apart from the polio, he's been in rude health for much of his life. Sure, there's that paralysed leg, a lifetime of calipers, but he's managed. Polio was in the past. He's got on with things. Not let it get in the way.

Until the last handful of years. "I'd never heard of LEOP (the late effects of polio)," he said. "I'd heard of post-polio syndrome but thought what a load of nonsense and took no notice."

"Then I started falling. I broke my same hip twice. My tibia and fibula. You don't realise but your legs get weaker and weaker. I can't walk very far. Old age has something to do with it but not everything."

He feels cheated; that polio has reached down through the decades — again causing him to falter and fall.



**UPHILL BATTLE:** Owen Bourke reflects on the disease that struck him down as a young man, below, and has come back to provide new challenges.

Photos: TONY KERRIGAN



"I've tried not to dwell on the polio, I've put up with it for 60 years and thought I'd conquered it," he said. "I didn't let it stop me. Most polios (sufferers) are like that. We try to disguise our disability. "Now I am frustrated. I'm paying again and have to work like hell to conquer it again."

Owen Bourke edits the newsletter for local support group, Geelong Polio Support Group. The group meets the first Monday of each month, at 10.30am, at the McKellar Centre. For details about the Geelong Polio Support Group, phone 5278 2422.

## Sufferers miss out on

MORE than 150,000 people who contracted polio between the 1930s and 1960s may be at risk of suffering the late effects of polio, according to a House of Representatives Health and Ageing Committee discussion paper.

More than 12 years after the World Health Organisation declared Australia a polio-free country, there could now be almost

1 per cent of the population suffering from late effects, or post-polio syndrome.

The committee said the effects could be debilitating physical and neurological symptoms, which were often misdiagnosed as chronic fatigue syndrome.

A lack of a definitive diagnostic test combined with limited awareness of the disease among health

## What made the news this week...



**fast facts**

**What is polio?**

A contagious disease spread virally which comes in three forms.

1. A mild form with flu-like symptoms — people may not even know they have it;
2. Non-paralytic polio with symptoms such as sensitivity to light and neck stiffness;
3. Paralytic polio, such as Owen Bourke had, causes muscle paralysis and can even result in death.

**People with polio**

Alan Alda, Mia Farrow, Donald Sutherland, Francis Ford Coppola, Kerry Packer, John Laws, Ian Dury, Donovan, John Konrads, Jack Nicklaus, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Frida Kahlo, Tony Armstrong-Jones, Alan Marshall, Katherine Jackson, Kim Beazley and Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

**October is National Polio Awareness Month**

Polio Australia (polioaustralia.org.au) will launch a learning resource for healthcare professionals and is calling for polio survivors to head to Canberra on October 31 as part of the *We're Still Here* campaign.



**treatment, often misdiagnosed**

professionals meant many sufferers were not getting the treatment they needed.

The effects of LEOP and post-polio syndrome were not only physical impairment but also social, emotional and financial, the committee said.

It recommended that the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and

Welfare collect data on the population size of polio survivors, while medical schools include LEOP and PPS in their curricula and Medicare Locals work with groups such as Polio Australia to raise awareness of the condition among health professionals and also the broader community.

MacKellar Centre rehabilitation specialist Dr Neil Crompton

echoed the committee's findings when he said the long-term effects of polio were not well understood by either the general or medical communities.

"It would be good to raise the profile (of LEOP and PPS) without actually raising alarm," Dr Crompton said.

"It is important to note not every polio sufferer will get LEOP."



**WE LIKE**

**TIPPING** nine. Pretty sweet strutting into the office on Monday after nailing the footy tipping ... until you find out three other people in your comp did it as well.



**PRINCE** Harry. He's young, he's single, he's rich. If he wants to get nude, let him do it without the right royal fuss.

**BREAKING** Bad. Might just be the greatest television show ever.

**DISCOVERING** the "cool" guy who tormented you at high school is now an overweight, balding father of eight.

**NOT SO MUCH**

**CHOOSING** poorly at a restaurant. Don't you hate it when the meals come out and your companion's dish is clearly the one you should have gone for?



**CHOOSING** well at a restaurant and then having to share your meal with your companion, who isn't happy with theirs.

**LANCE** Armstrong. You owe me 154 late nights of my life back after watching you win those seven Tours.

**WHEN** they serve the chicken parmigiana on top of the chips, instead of next to them. Just makes them soggy. It's not rocket surgery.