

Polio outbreaks a thing of the past – but effects still linger

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Polio, a disease that affected millions of children in the twentieth century – including the likes of MASH star, Alan Alda and musician, Joni Mitchell and, closer to home, Kerry Packer and Kim Beazley – has largely been forgotten in Australia.

The catchcry of Polio Awareness Month is ‘We’re Still Here!’ It’s a reminder that, while Australia hasn’t seen a polio outbreak for several decades, many people are still living with its effects.

Every October, Polio Awareness Month recognises the tens of thousands of polio survivors in Australia.

This year, Polio Australia is lighting up landmarks in orange and distributing orange face masks to spread the word that while polio outbreaks may be gone, their effects still linger.

Gillian Thomas OAM, Polio Australia’s president and a survivor of polio herself, says, “What’s missing is the awareness – health professionals know little to nothing about polio, and polio survivors don’t know where to turn for answers. Polio Australia is trying to increase that awareness, and get the information into the right hands.”

The late effects of Polio include progressive muscle weakness, breathing difficulty, debilitating fatigue, chronic pain and swallowing disorders.

She said even those who had a mild case of polio – and some who were unaware they were ever infected – can develop these symptoms many years later. With polio outbreaks now a distant memory, these late effects are little-known even among doctors and other health professionals.

Many survivors are dismissed as simply “getting old,” while others are given unhelpful or even detrimental treatments.

Author and poet Gayle Kennedy, a Wongaibon woman who wrote of her experience with polio in the anthology *Growing Up Disabled in Australia*, knows what it's like for post-polio symptoms to be misunderstood by health professionals.

“Nobody knows much about it, nobody knows what we go through,” she says.

“Because we're old, we're kind of pushed aside.”

Some polio survivors are themselves unaware of polio's late effects. Many struggle to manage daily tasks with nothing to explain their symptoms, she said.

Polio Australia provides education and resources for both health professionals and polio survivors. For more information, see www.polioaustralia.org.au.

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