

Late effects of polio a health issue little known or understood

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SO MANY CHILDREN: Polio Australia president Gillian Thomas in 1951 in what is known as a double Thomas splint, with arms and legs immobilised.

With the unfolding Covid-19 situation, many Australians are experiencing major disease outbreaks for the first time.

But as the upcoming Polio Awareness Month reminds us, Australians are no strangers to such outbreaks, or the fear and uncertainty that come with them.

Many people who were alive in Australia in the middle of last century grew up under the shadow of polio.

Often known as infantile paralysis, 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.

In industrialised countries the disease was brought under control after the development and introduction of effective [vaccines](#).

However, there were missteps along the way, In the US, an improperly inactivated vaccine resulted in 40,000 cases of polio, leaving 200 children with varying degrees of paralysis and killing 10.

Work nevertheless proceeded and IPV, developed by [Jonas Salk](#), was distributed across Australia from June 1956, with the Commonwealth Serum Laboratory manufacturing 25 million doses. OPV, oral vaccine invented by Albert Sabin, was used from 1966.

Decades later, many who lived through these outbreaks experienced a cluster of symptoms known as Late Effects of Polio. They included people who had had a mild case of polio in the past, or were perhaps even unaware that they had been infected,

Symptoms of post-polio syndrome 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.



PROGRESS: Gillian standing in callipers as her condition improved, to some degree.

Still others are unaware themselves that their symptoms are related to childhood exposure to polio.

Those who survived exposure to the viral disease are mostly older now, and are again seeking help from medical and health professionals.

But getting the right help isn't always easy.

Polio Australia president Gillian Thomas, a survivor of polio herself, says lack of awareness of polio's late effects among the health professional community is a very real frustration for many survivors.

Her organisation provides educational resources about on the Late Effects of Polio across the country, for health professionals and survivors.

Polio Australia is hosting a variety of online information sessions throughout Polio Awareness Month.

On October 5, there will be a Q&A session with rehabilitation physician Stephen de Graaff.

In addition there will be weekly Zoom chats, where attendees will have an opportunity to share and learn from each other, and perhaps hear a polio survivor share their story.

These will be held on October 12, 19 and 26 from 11am in Victoria, NSW and Tasmania; 10am in Perth; 10:30 in SA and the NT; and 8am in WA. For details go to www.polioaustralia.org.au/community-information-sessions.

For further information for details about joining your local state body, go to www.polioaustralia.org.au