

Aging and PPS

Yesterday I went to a swim meet. The meet was between the women's team of Randolph Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, and the women's team from Greensboro College in Greensboro, North Carolina. The meet was in Ashland and my son is the coach of the Randolph Macon team. The women on both teams were in the prime of life and in excellent physical condition. Sitting on one side of the pool were many of the parents of the young women in the meet. The parents were mostly in their forties and fifties. One could easily distinguish the difference between the swimmers and their parents' generation because of the evidence of aging. In general the older generation had graying hair, weighed more, moved slower and did not exhibit fair smooth skin. This older generation was experiencing normal aging. How does one distinguish between normal aging and the symptoms of Post Polio Syndrome (PPS)?

We know that the damage done by the polio virus involved the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord). Among many of us some motor neurons were destroyed or damaged. Others of us "recovered" and were seemingly unaffected by the polio virus. For several decades we functioned in a stable life style until the symptoms of PPS hit some of us. How much of what hit us was simple aging and what impact does PPS have on aging?

Almost ten years ago I mailed out a rather thorough questionnaire to our membership. This questionnaire covered many aspects of our individual journeys with polio and our recent experiences with PPS.

Sixty one people completed and returned the questionnaires. The average age of the responders was 59 years old. 70% were married and 80% had at least one child. 50% had completed a college education. 90% reported new motor weakness; 80% reported new pain and 72% reported cognitive or brain fatigue. None of these new symptoms were caused by aging alone.

Now we are a decade older and our average age is approaching seventy. We are experiencing some of the usual problems of aging. To varying degrees our cardiovascular systems have aged. Most of us are taking medication for hypertension or diuretics to reduce fluid retention or medicine to lower cholesterol. Our central nervous system may also show the signs of aging. Our memories for the details of recent events may not be as sharp, but we can remember the distant past with ease. This is one reason why grandparents are so good at telling stories of the past to grandkids.

Muscles also weaken some with aging. It takes more energy for a seventy year old to get off the floor than someone half that age. Some degree of bone softening occurs with aging and hip fractures are not uncommon among older people. The genitourinary system can show signs of aging. Our bladders are not as elastic and we may often have to treat constipation.

Our respiratory systems usually experience a gradual diminishing of vital capacity as we age. We can get winded more easily. Older people often encounter interrupted sleep,

often to get up during the night to go to the bathroom. It may be more necessary to take a daytime nap in order to get adequate rest.

Aging may or may not impact on PPS. Aging can gradually affect us in the ways previously described. Thus, if our muscles are weakening and our skeletal system is softening as we age, PPS can be impacted by these factors. Not everyone ages at the same rate. Genetics and life style factors, unrelated to PPS, can be important factors in life expectancy. Smoking is an example of a major life style choice that can impact adversely on the cardiovascular and respiratory systems.

All of us should maintain regular visits with our primary care physicians in an effort to prevent and treat the disorders that can accompany aging. We should be more familiar with the problems brought on by PPS. Look around at your able bodied peers and it is usually easy to distinguish what aging is doing to them and what aging along with PPS is doing to us. Whatever your age, good medical care, reading and learning about your own situation is good advice.

The women of Randolph Macon College won the swim meet and a pool record in the 100 meter butterfly was accomplished by one of the Yellow Jackets. Oh, the joy of youth

Then, sing ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to day
Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind,
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be,
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering,
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.*

*from William Wordsworth's Ode to Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood

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Systems of the body

Central Nervous System (brain, cranial nerves, spinal cord, autonomic system)

PPS – motor weakness, pain, fatigue

Neuromuscular system (motor nerves, muscles and skeleton)

PPS – muscles atrophy and motor neuron weaken, spinal curvature, joint damage)

Cardiovascular system (heart and peripheral vascular system – arteries and veins)

PPS-

Respiratory system

PPS - breathing

Gastrointestinal system (stomach, intestine, colon, liver)

PPS - swallowing

Genito urinary (reproductive organs and urological organs, kidney, ureters, bladder, uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes, urethra, testes, prostate gland).

Skin