

PPS and the Central Virginia Post-Polio Support Group

The Central Virginia Post Polio Support Group is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this summer. Maybe “celebration” is a misnomer for this event. I am sure that most of us wish we had never heard of PPS and never experienced it as a reality. PPS has caused most of us to change our life styles and our thinking about how to deal with disability.

One of the early supporters of our PPSG is Susanne Hirt. Sue is now elderly and requires the help of others for her daily needs. Several years ago I wrote an article about Sue’s life and her contribution to our group. That article is on our website at:

<http://cvppsg.org/henrydesk/>

Sue was a physical therapist at the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) Hospital during the worst of the polio years. She was an advocate of the Sister Kenny treatment for acute polio. Before coming to MCV, Sue had met Sister Kenny and studied Kenny’s theories while she was at the University of Wisconsin. During my years in medical school at MCV (1962-1966), Sue was the director of the school of physical therapy. Because of Sue’s current failing health many of her papers were distributed and I was fortunate enough to receive her files/papers on polio and PPS.

Among her papers are what seem to be lectures that Sue presented to physical therapy students. The papers are typed with some underlining and words added in the margins. One of these lectures is titled “The Treatment of Poliomyelitis” and the lecture is dated September 25, 1945. Her lecture emphasized the importance of an early assessment of the extent of paralysis and the recommended treatment. The presence of muscle spasm and weakness were important to detect and measure. Her treatment recommendations were almost identical to Sister Kenny’s methods. The best treatment for muscle spasm was the application of hot packs. One portion of her lecture that I found to be of interest was Sue’s detailed instruction regarding what came to be known as the Kenny hot packs. A demonstration of the application of hot packs was performed as Sue lectured. Here are Sue’s words:

“The packs are best made of a soft material that contains 60-100% wool. They are cut to the size of the patient, covered with a water repelling material, f.i. oil silk and an outer woolen layer as protection. They are boiled and applied as hot as possible, which is safe only if most of the moisture has been removed. They are applied firmly and evenly preventing carefully any sensation of pressure or restriction, particularly to swallowing and respiration. Joints are left free to avoid the sensation of immobilization, only hip and shoulder joints are excepted due to the large muscle groups crossing these joints which frequently are in spasm. The packs cool off to body temperature in 15 to 20 minutes, but will not chill the patient if secured safely. The frequency of application varies with the acuteness and painfulness of the spasm, an average is 5-6 applications during 8 hours. Intensive packing may be used for severe cases, i.e. renewal of packs every 15 minutes or even more often if spasm produces respiratory distress. Packing is discontinued as soon as normal pain free joint movements can be obtained.”

For many of you this description of the “hot packs” may result in some painful memories. Among Sue’s papers was a lecture she presented on September 13, 1943 to the University Club at the University of Wisconsin. The topic of her lecture was “The Kenny Method of the Treatment of Poliomyelitis.” This would indicate that Sue was on the cutting edge of the advances made in the physical therapy treatment of polio.

Her papers would also indicate that she was well aware of PPS before many of us learned of this condition. She had saved an issue (Volume 2, Number 1) of the Polio Information Center News. This newsletter was published by the Polio Information Center located on Roosevelt Island, NY, and this issue was dated Fall 1984. The article reported the results of a questionnaire that had been mailed to many polio survivors several years previous. This effort resulted in 700 completed questionnaires. The findings validated the physical changes which were affecting a great number of people who had polio 25 to 30 years ago. The detailed results of this study would require a separate essay. However, it is evident that the problems with weakness, fatigue and pain were gaining momentum twenty-two years ago. The greatest number of complaints at that time was shortness of breath (85%), dizziness (65%) and depression (44%). I suspect that these complaints were high because most polio survivors did not know what was happening to them and they were continuing to overdo and push through pain.

When other survivors and a few health care providers became aware of these physical changes, the diagnosis of PPS became more accepted. Thus, in July 1986 the first meeting of the Central Virginia Post-Polio Support Group was held. Sue Hirt was there. The history of our group is printed elsewhere in this newsletter. It is now twenty years later. We are all twenty years older, but we are more knowledgeable and wiser. We are an upbeat support group, but have come together in times of loss when one among us has died. On a personal level I look forward to our meetings because we have esprit de corps, which is defined as “the common spirit existing in the members of a group and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of the group.”

Because of PPS our group was formed and because of our group we have educated, advocated and supported each other. We will continue to exist for these purposes for years to come.