

Polio Particles 13

Mary Westbrook

New Australian memorials to Sister Kenny

Two memorials honoring Sister Kenny marked the 50th anniversary of her death in November 2002. The University of Southern Queensland announced the establishment of the Sister Elizabeth Kenny Professorial Chair of Rural and Remote Health and the appointment of the inaugural holder of the Chair, Professor Desley Hegney. In Nobby (where Kenny is buried) a mural was unveiled at the Kenny memorial museum which was opened in 1997. The glass mural shows Kenny holding the hands of two children (showing no signs of disability) as they face the sunrise. At the same time a miniature model of the Sylvia stretcher was placed on view in the museum. Kenny made the original stretcher from a door to transport a young Nobby girl to hospital following a farm accident. A restored brass bed from Kenny's house was donated to the museum and four palm trees were planted; one by Kenny's adopted daughter.

Frida Kahlo minus polio

The recent film *Frida* shows Kahlo as able-bodied in her youth; running, skipping and dancing in high heels. There is no mention of the polio which she contracted aged six. At this time Frida spent nine months in bed. Her doctor prescribed an exercise program for her atrophied right leg. As an adult this leg was shorter than the left so she wore a built-up shoe and three or four socks on the thin calf to increase its bulk. Frida's scoliosis also predated the accident with a trolley car which further disabled her. Writing in Znet (25/1/03), Marta Russell suggests that much of the pain Kahlo experienced *can be attributed to post polio and overuse syndrome*. She queries: *Why did the filmmaker decide to obliterate the polio?..Did Hayek (the actor playing Frida), whose voluptuous eat-me-up body is displayed nude on the big screen at every possible opportunity, object to having one of her legs 'withered' by reality? One can only speculate but this seems a plausible explanation since the leg factor is bought up in the film by Frida's husband Diego Rivera's first wife Lupe when she cries to Diego, 'you give up these legs' stroking her own thigh 'for these matchsticks, these peg legs' grabbing at Kahlo's skirt.*

Penalty for speeding wheelchairs

Valley College in Los Angeles has imposed a campus speed limit of 4 miles per hour on wheelchairs. People caught speeding may be expelled. No wheelchair collisions have been reported at the college but the vice-president of administration pushed for the policy after seeing a wheelchair user going *very fast*. *'It's like a bad joke,' said 56 year old Lynn Eiler, 'We figured they've got to be kidding that we might be a danger to somebody. In fact we have to watch out for everybody else'* (*New Mobility, January 2003*). The Center for Individual Freedom (www.cfif.org) discusses the situation in its column, Jester's Courtroom. *We're curious to see how Valley College administrators plan to enforce this new 'safety' measure. Will student fees be used install radar cameras? Better yet, Jester's Courtroom readers stay tuned as some trial lawyer somewhere has got to be scheming up an argument to slap on Valley College—maybe the tried and true Americans with Disability Act.*

Results of polio treatment enhanced by warm climate

The Norwegian Journal *Tidsskr Nor Laegeforen* published (6/2001) the results of a study by Y. A. Strumse and others showing that Norwegian polio survivors receiving a month's

(November/December) treatment in Tenerife experienced greater benefits than their counterparts who underwent similar treatment in Norway. Patients were randomly assigned to the Tenerife program, the Norway program or a control group. Patients were tested at the beginning of the research, immediately after the program and three and six months later. While both treatment programs resulted in gains, the Tenerife group improved more and the effects lasted longer. For example, at the conclusion of the program the Tenerife group had increased the distance they could walk in six minutes by 82 metres while the Norway group only increased their walking distance by 46 metres. The pain levels of the Tenerife group also fell more and the improvements lasted longer. The midwinter climatic difference between the Canary Islands and Norway is considerable but one can't help wondering if the excitement of a holiday in an exotic locale might also have contributed to greater enthusiasm, optimism and extra-curricula activities among the Tenerife patients. Perhaps you can persuade your health fund to send you to Port Douglas for treatment.

Hotel pays accessibility damages

For the first time in the Netherlands a person with a disability has received compensation for inaccessibility in a hotel. An official advisory council to the Dutch government booked the Sheraton Pulitzer for its two day annual meeting after being assured that it would be accessible for the vice-chair, Ms Koster, who uses an electric wheelchair. She was told *that only the door to the function room bathroom might be too narrow...but I could use the accessible bathroom across the corridor*. In reality she could not access the function room or the restaurant without help from others to get up steps. The accessible bathroom was not adjacent to the function room but in the lobby. The door to her bedroom was too narrow. When she asked for a room with a wider door staff told there were none and left her to fend for herself. As Ms Koster could not stay for the night she went to inform her colleagues she was leaving. They were in the bar and as it was inaccessible she was unable to tell them. The council took the matter to a lawyer. The hotel settled, paying E4800 to the council and E1200 to Ms Koster. The hotel's reaction has been to place a 'Not suitable for wheelchairs' notice on its website. (Story from *Disability World* 9/2002)

Resurgence of polio in two countries

Polio cases occurred in only seven countries in 2002. However the number of cases rose significantly from the previous year in two countries, India and Nigeria (New York Times, 19/1/03). In India in 2001 there were 239 new cases, down from 200,000 in the early 1980s, but in 2002 there were 1,509 new cases. *A vast majority, 1,197, were in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, and one of its poorest. Uttar Pradesh accounted for 68% of polio cases worldwide*. According to community leaders the rise was the result of a rumour that the oral vaccine is part of a government plot to control population growth. *The polio outbreak has exposed a religious, or communal, health divide. Only 17% of Uttar Pradesh's population is Muslim, but 59% of its polio cases last year were among Muslims, who in Uttar Pradesh tend to be landless laborers with lower literacy rates and a greater mistrust of the Hindu-dominated government*. The British Medical Journal (318/02) attributed the setback in Nigeria to *propaganda fuelled by a cassette recording by an American organization that was widely circulated among the Muslim community. The recording claimed that immunization was a ploy by Western governments to promote family planning and infect children with HIV*. The Nigerian government mobilized traditional religious leaders to counter the propaganda, with success except in a few areas. Nigerian vaccinators are women as the culture does not permit men to go inside homes looking for mothers and children. According to Mail&Guardian-online (2/2/03) *each vaccinator is accompanied by a local mail guide, who has the approval of local leaders and who knows intimately the crowded alleyways of his neighborhood or the dusty lanes of his village. Several of these pairs work as 'sweep teams', knocking on every door they find. Each child who gets immunized is marked on the left thumbnail with indelible ultraviolet ink and a symbol is scratched on the door with chalk*.

New role for Collaroy Children's Hospital

Polio patients who were admitted to Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children, Camperdown, usually spent some months at the hospital's convalescence annex at Collaroy. The hospital was situated in Beach Road, on a prime piece of real estate with magnificent ocean views. The site was given to the hospital in 1921 by George Sargood who had built a beach house there. RAHC constructed three wards (girls, bubs and boys) in front of the house. These opened onto a wide veranda. The roller doors to the wards were open most of the time and beds were rolled onto the veranda during the day. My memories of almost a year spent there range from the tragic to the humorous. I still worry about the effect that hospital had on the 'froggies', as the 'bubs' with congenital dislocation of the hips were called. There was a row of them in the 'bubs' ward, their legs were in set in plaster at right angles to their waists. They stayed in hospital at least 18 months. Many came from the country so they did not often have a Sunday visitor and were far too young to appreciate mail. On a lighter note, a couple of us who could crawl 'broke into' the physiotherapy room one night, stole plaster bandages and put our dolls in plaster. My mother used to wonder how I got splinters in my socks when I couldn't get out of bed.

In 1966 when RAHC moved out the building was taken over by the Manly-Warringah Developmental Disability Service. Now the Australian Quadriplegic Association has acquired the site and plans to build a rehabilitation unit that will provide transitional accommodation for people with spinal injuries. *AQA is especially conscious of the current back-log in the hospitals, of people who are unable to move to the next stage of their journey to regaining their lives (Quadrangle Summer, 2000).* Some end up in nursing homes. An appeal to raise four million dollars to build the facility has been launched.

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