

Not just for infants any more: The legacy of infantile paralysis

by Caroline Porter

Local podiatrist Dr. Alva J. Harler, 64, was afflicted with polio when he was 3-years-old in 1938. His grandpa said to his parents, "I think he has infantile paralysis," because he had a bad sore throat and could hardly stand. A doctor told them he had a sprained back.

The words "infantile paralysis" and "polio" struck fear in the hearts of Americans in the 1940s and '50s and for good reason. The outbreak of the dreaded disease reached almost epidemic proportions right here in west central Illinois. Galesburg was particularly hard-hit. The disease preferred the young, even babies, hence the name "infantile paralysis." No one was sure how it arrived. It was thought the disease was airborne or waterborne and carried by mosquitoes, so lakes and pools were closed in the summertime. Harler remembers Paul Peck spraying for a block around The Huddle, a restaurant and bar for many years on the corner of Dayton and Henderson streets. People were afraid to eat out, to socialize.

After care, doctors and funeral directors burned their clothing and that of the diseased for fear of "catching" it. There were two kinds of polio — bulbar, which affected breathing and required the use of an iron lung and the second caused curvature of the spine and other complications.

It has since been discovered that poliomyelitis is a virus. Drs. Sabin and Salk developed vaccines that have practically eradicated it from this country.



Dr. A. J. Harler

Harler didn't walk for about three years. His parents massaged his muscles to stimulate them and a local podiatrist, Dr. Curry Meyer, provided physical therapy long before it became a specialized practice. Harler recovered after three years, but his left leg was severely atrophied. In Junior High School he had a series of reconstructive surgeries on his left leg at St. Francis Hospital in Peoria where he stayed for three months, attending the St. Francis School for polio victims.

Other than wearing a built-up shoe, Harler showed few outward signs of his bout with polio. He graduated from Bradley University, studied pre-med at Western Illinois University and podiatry at Illinois College in Chicago. "From 1945 until 1985, I was able to do anything," Harler said. He is in his 42nd year of practice in his clinic on East Ferris Street in Galesburg. He bought and trained Welsh ponies, raised, showed and judged Shetland Sheep dogs and Norfolk Terriers. He and his wife traveled all over the country in a motor home, attending and judging dog shows.

In the mid-70s Harler and his friend, retired school teacher Bob Self, began publishing a newspaper about dog training called *Front and Finish*, still published by Self in Wataga.

But about 1985 things began to gradually change for Alva Harler. He began to notice general fatigue, then more specific muscle fatigue. He started feeling pain that he doesn't remember having even when he had polio — a new kind of pain. Gradually the muscles weakened by the polio are hurting and the good muscles, which have done so much of the work for over 40 years, are reacting to overwork. Dr. Harler says that his right leg is now more atrophied than his left. He started using a walker in 1994 and in 1995 became wheelchair-bound for the first time. He has discovered that he has a newly recognized malady — post polio syndrome.

"Post polio syndrome affects mostly those with "A" type personalities," said Harler, "who worked hard to overcome

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their disabilities and overused all muscles. Now the body and muscles are aging three times as fast as normal."

As he became weaker, it became obvious he had to drastically change his lifestyle. He no longer raises his beloved dogs or travels to shows or is a judge. Even though he still practices podiatry, he sold the business to his associate, Dr. J. M. Macek. He and his wife have sold their home and live in the new Hitchcock Apartments, where they are comfortable and happy. He no longer helps publish *Front and Finish*.

He and his wife of 44 years have sold the motor home in which they traveled around the country and have a permanent trailer in a campground near Hopedale. There they spend quiet three-day weekends with friends for six months out of the year.

"Sometimes I have deep bone pain and sometimes not much pain," says Harler, "but right now it feels like I have hot poker from my hips to my feet. I don't remember pain before, just the sore throats and the atrophy."

"There is a psychological component to post polio syndrome," says Harler. "The active pushers, doers, goers, shakers are forced to slow down and it's hard. And when we start feeling these symptoms, we ask ourselves, 'Is this all in your head?'" He said some older polio patients think all their medical problems are polio-related and they aren't.

But now Harler has become active in the International Polio Network, and belongs to a post polio task force. There are 640,000 polio survivors in the country and at this point 20 to 40 percent are experiencing post polio syndrome. The percentage is expected to rise as polio patients age. "I like to talk about it," he says. "I've found people to talk to and when my wife and I walked into that conference in St. Louis there were 300 attendees and 95 percent of the

speakers were post-polio patients. After about 15 minutes I knew that even though I was having problems, I was still better off than 85 percent of the people there.

"Your world can change," said Harler, "It was a good contact."

He told the poignant story of a petite, pretty Japanese woman who spoke at the post polio conference. She had survived on a polio "tray," a gurney with all the equipment needed to keep her alive for 20 years. She was completely paralyzed except for her head, neck and right arm. She had six attendants. Nine seats had been removed from the airplane so she could travel. She spoke about the attitude of Japan towards polio patients as disabled as she, whom she says are treated like we used to treat lepers in this country, isolated and locked in hospital wards.

With emotion, Harler described the lovely young woman asking her attendant to hold up a mirror so she could check her makeup before giving her speech.

Harler says he appreciates what's been accomplished by the Americans With Disabilities Act and the resultant ease with which he can move around downtown Galesburg on his scooter. So far the upper half of his body is strong and he can drive. He can get from wheelchair to driver's seat with a walker.

Harler said the latest outbreak of polio in this country was about ten to 14 years ago when a group of Dutch citizens who didn't believe in vaccinations settled in Southern Canada and some eventually moved to Ohio. Incidences of polio broke out in both Canada and Ohio.

After some fear and depression, Dr. Harler is positive about his life and what he's learned so far. "I love what I'm doing and the people I work with," he exclaimed. "I will work as long as I can. Please tell people I'm still here in the office on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays!"