



# WORKING WITH POLIO SURVIVORS

## AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL CAVENDISH, AEP

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Australia was officially declared polio free in 2000, but that doesn't mean that the effects of the virus have disappeared in this country entirely. Paul Cavendish is an AEP working with Polio Australia as a clinical health educator for health professionals.

### **A very niche topic, Paul – how much knowledge is there for clinicians and GPs about polio and its late effects?**

Polio as a disease is being eradicated thanks to the widespread vaccination programs across the world, however the effects of the disease continue long after the initial onset of the virus. A person with a history of polio can be diagnosed after 15 years or more time of relative stability with Post-Polio Syndrome, a neurological diagnosis typically characterised by gradual or abrupt muscle weakness, increased fatigue, and pain. Because of this time period of stability, and the success of vaccination programs, there is little knowledge among health and medical professionals regarding polio. This is despite large numbers of people in Australia from a historical and immigration perspective that have a history of this motor neuron disease. As someone ages, the effects of polio become more and more apparent, and need to be closely monitored and managed as motor units drop out.

### **What are the standard symptoms among polio survivors?**

People typically associate polio with the flaccid paralysis in the lower leg, and while this

is a very common effect from the disease, the polio virus has usually left effects throughout the body. A polio survivor may have weakness in muscle groups and not physically present with this obvious sign. There are also 15% of polio survivors that had bulbar effects from the virus, experiencing respiratory insufficiency and problems with speech and swallowing. What is often not recognised is the fatigue a polio survivor experiences from central fatigue effects and the energy costs of having less available motor units to perform general activities. There are also a lot of biomechanical factors that create muscle spasm and compensation that require management and considerations for referral and working with other health disciplines to preserve joint integrity.

### **What role can exercise psychologists play in the lives of polio survivors and these symptoms?**

Exercise physiologists can play a crucial role for polio survivors. Exercise prescription needs to be based on a thorough history and consideration of co-morbidities as well as the polio history. As an AEP, we can assess strength via manual muscle testing, do a series of functional measures, and then creatively prescribe the right amount and type of exercise to

avoid overloading joints and high fatigue levels while maintaining function.

### **Tell us a little more about yourself, Paul.**

I began working in our industry before there was recognition as an Accredited Exercise Physiologist. I was fortunate enough to work in a physiotherapy clinic delivering end-stage rehabilitation exercise programs which helped me with my knowledge of functional exercises. I also learnt a lot about how to put programs together after working overseas delivering exercise programs to older adults in conjunction with a university and local council. I was very close to going back to university and complete physiotherapy studies, but opted for a Master of Clinical Exercise Physiology in 2013, as it was using exercise with my clients that was my main passion.

I am the owner of Synapse your Health, an Exercise Physiology business based in the Tweed region, northern NSW, which I set up in 2014. The Tweed coast is a great part of the world. I used to be one of the many people who came down from the Gold Coast and Brisbane to enjoy the great surf, mountains and fishing, but now I live here, although I still can't claim to be a local for some time yet!

## **How did you find yourself working with Polio Australia as an AEP?**

I have always had an interest and really enjoyed working with clients that have neurological conditions or are older to help with improving or maintaining their function. Working with polio survivors was a great fit for me professionally, although I must say, a common misconception is that polio survivors are "old", which is not the case. I also enjoy how polio survivors approach life – while it is problematic to generalise, you will find a large number who are high-achievers (sometimes to their own detriment!) and are great problem-solvers to their situation. When the Department of Health committed to improving the knowledge and skills of health professionals by providing a grant to Polio Australia to run workshops, it was too good an opportunity to not try and see if I could deliver these workshops.

## **What does your role as a clinical health educator include?**

Sometimes long days and nights! There is plenty of travel, and I really am appreciating how big and varied our country is. My key role is to

deliver workshops across Australia to allied health professionals throughout the year. Have a look at [www.poliohealth.org.au](http://www.poliohealth.org.au) for a workshop close to you! I also research the latest evidence regarding treatment and management of the late effects of polio. I have started to also work with other organisations and support groups to promote the needs of polio survivors, and options to work with polio survivors, to hopefully translate increased knowledge into improvements in health and quality of life.

## **What are the key messages of your Clinical Practice Workshops that are aimed to educate health professionals across Australia?**

It is more than likely you have worked, or will work, with polio survivors, as it is recognised as Australia's largest physical disability group. With some understanding of this motor neurone disease, and how the late effects of polio occur, you will be able to provide appropriate treatment and management. A critical aspect of doing this is understanding the role of activity and exercise prescription which requires appropriate assessment with muscle charting and how to monitor fatigue.



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**THIS IS FROM JENNY JONES, A 62-YEAR-OLD POLIO SURVIVOR ON HOW EXERCISE HAS PLAYED A ROLE IN HER LIFE:**

*I was a late starter and an early finisher in club sports. I contracted polio at the age of 5 years old which left me with muscle weakness in legs, sensitivity to cold, and severe fatigue. Although I could swim, my body would shiver so badly even after only a few minutes in the water, and I easily fatigued when I was a child. This restricted the amount of training I could participate in through my schooling years.*

*Swimming and golf became a big part of my life in my early to mid-adult years. I joined a swimming club and swam in competitions at club and state levels. When I was in my late 40's, I nearly drowned at the beach when my muscles just did not have my usual power to keep going in the water. Luckily, I was able to drag myself in. From then on I became a very cautious swimmer and stopped club swimming entirely.*

*I had the good fortune that golf was offered to me in my senior years at school. The pro saw some talent in me and encouraged me to pursue the game. Golf came easy to me, and I was soon playing with a group of friends at a local golf club. Within a couple of years, I had won several competitions and lovely prizes. By my late 40's, my left leg was weaker and I was given an ultimatum, play golf or be able to walk.*

**" I am way better when I am doing my exercises with my husband or grandchildren – it is so much more fun and enjoyable for me. "**

*I gave up golf, but with this I gave up my social life and my love of paying golf. I am in my early 60's, and although I appreciate that window of opportunity to swim and play golf at club level, it has left a big hole in my social circles and the buzz competitive sport gave me.*

*I now follow a water program of approximately 20 minutes designed for my needs. I try to use no more than 80% of my energy when I exercise, leaving 20% to do essential activities and allow a recovery period. I also have a land-based workout for the winter months. I also use a Fitbit and discovered that around 5,000 steps per day is ideal for me, but over this amount puts a lot of strain on my legs.*

*I am way better when I am doing my exercises with my husband or grandchildren – it is so much more fun and enjoyable for me.*

