9:05 – 9:35 am

Presidential Guest Speaker

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Stories of Polio

The history of polio in America is a fascinating story. As I became interested in the subject, after all I have worked at a hospital originally founded to treat polio, I realized that those who could tell the story were fading with the passage of time. I was fortunate to be able to produce a documentary film about polio, a film which has had a success which surprised us. In this lecture I will recount many of the unique aspects of the era.

Polio had been in civilization as far back as Egyptian times, but only reached epidemic proportions in the early 20th century. Oddly enough, this happened as the environment became more hygienic, and infants and young children were not exposed to the viruses early on when maternal antibodies could reduce the paralytic effects of the disease. The first epidemics occurred in New England, the most devastating hitting New York in the summer of 1917. Soon polio news began to eclipse news of the Great War.

Affected children were often kept out of the public eye, and attitudes of the time were harsh. Hospitals with rough names, like the Hospital for the Ruptured and Crippled, the Newington House and Home for Incurables and others opened to take care of the “cripples”. Orthopedic surgery, an infant specialty at the time, rose to the many challenges with innovative tendon and muscle transfers, bone stabilizing arthrodeses, and a multitude of braces and devices.

Franklin Roosevelt, an up and coming national politician, developed polio in his 30’s. His condition of almost complete paralysis of the lower extremities was largely hidden from the public throughout his career, which included reaching the Presidency. He devoted great energy to raising money through the March of Dimes to not only care for those afflicted, but to support basic research into the etiology.

A pivotal step in developing a vaccine was the ability to grow virus in tissue culture, a discovery which rewarded Drs. Enders, Weller, and Robbins of Harvard and Children's Hospital with a Nobel prize. Later Salk and Sabin literally battled it out with competing vaccines, one with killed virus and the other with attenuated live virus. Each vaccine has had its day, and currently both are still in use.

Many segments of the film will be shown, including descriptions from many living with the memories of iron lungs, surgeries, and braces. Therapists, physicians, and scientists, fortunately still living, give the background and detail of the times.