Just What the Doctor Ordered

When Carol-Ann Normandin was almost 4 years old, a terrible disease changed her life. At first, the symptoms were ordinary: headaches, fever, chills, and stomachaches.

Because those symptoms didn't go away, Carol-Ann's mother had an idea that her daughter was suffering from something more than the flu. It was 1948, and the local health department had sent notices to parents warning them about a disease that left children paralyzed and even dead.

An easy test would confirm Mom's worst fear. She took Carol-Ann's head and pushed it slowly toward the girl's chest. A sharp pain usually meant the disease had taken hold.

"I screamed so loud that I raised the roof," Normandin told Weekly Reader Senior Edition. "Once I screamed, [my mother] called the doctor."

The disease went by the name of poliomyelitis. Carol-Ann's mother and millions of others simply called the affliction polio.

"[My parents] took me to the Toronto Sick Children's Hospital," Normandin said. "I don't remember much else. I remember being in an isolation ward¹ looking out the window at my father."

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¹ isolation ward: room or section in a hospital where patients with contagious diseases are kept away from visitors and other patients
Miracle Vaccine

You might not have heard of polio before. That's because 50 years ago, on April 12, 1955, the U.S. government approved the use of a vaccine\(^2\) that stopped people from getting the disease. Invented by Jonas Salk, the vaccine all but eradi\(^cated\)^3 polio worldwide.

To commemorate the anniversary of the vaccine's approval, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., has an exhibit called "Whatever Happened to Polio?"

Searching for a Cure

Polio has been around since ancient times. But the disease reemerged with a deadly vengeance\(^4\) in the 20th century. The disease is caused by a virus that attacks and destroys the nerve cells in the spinal cord and brain that control muscles in the arms, legs and stomach. Many of those who survive the disease are crippled for life.

From the early 1900s to the mid-1950s, most polio victims were children. More than 80 percent of the victims were under 5 years old. The worst year of the epidemic was 1952, David Rose of the March of Dimes told Weekly Reader Senior Edition. There were 57,000 cases that year, he said.

American families were scared out of their wits. Many moved to the mountains and to the deserts, thinking they would escape the illness. Parents refused to let their kids go outside to play.

The disease was so terrible that in 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose legs had been paralyzed by polio in 1921, declared war on the disease. He urged scientists to find a cure.

By 1952, Salk had succeeded in producing an experimental vaccine. Two years later, Salk got permission to vaccinate 1.8 million kids as a test. Those who received the medicine never got polio.

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\(^2\) vaccine: a preparation of killed, weakened, or fully infectious microbes that is given (by injection or by mouth) to produce or increase immunity to a particular disease

\(^3\) eradicate: do away with completely; eliminate

\(^4\) vengeance: punishing force
Disease on Display

The Smithsonian's exhibit looks at the history of polio and Salk's development of a vaccine. Among the objects on display are the leg braces worn by Roosevelt.

Although polio has disappeared from much of the world, it still threatens children in Africa and Southeast Asia. The exhibit's focus is on current efforts to immunize children in those places.

“One of the Blessed”

Carol-Ann Normandin, who is now 56 [2005], says it's important that the Smithsonian is highlighting the achievements of Salk and other scientists.

"It pleases me a lot that there is an exhibit at the Smithsonian about the polio vaccine," she said. "It is good to remind people about the past so that we can appreciate the present and protect the future."

Normandin says she's "one of the blessed." She regained the use of her legs a year after becoming infected. She never used a wheelchair or wore braces. Today, though, she suffers from problems caused by the disease, such as arthritis, a bone disease.

"Today, kids don't have a clue about polio," she said. "When I hear about people who don't get the vaccine, it angers me. There's no reason for people to get polio today."