

POLIO VERSUS THE WEST NILE VIRUS: A DOUBLE STANDARD OF DISBELIEF

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On September 20, 2002, “The Washington Post” reported that the West Nile virus is for the first time affecting younger and healthier people and has caused at least six cases of “polio-like paralysis”, in arms, legs and even breathing muscles, causing several individuals to be placed on respirators.

Polio, paralysis and respirators. These words strike fear in the 1.63 million Americans alive today who had polio and in those who lived through the polio epidemics that terrorized the world fifty years ago. It is also frightening that the symptoms and damage done to the brain and spinal cord due to the West Nile virus and polioviruses – different viruses in different ways – are so similar: nearly 1% of those infected with WNV have paralysis, almost the same percentage as those infected with polioviruses; up to 15 percent of those severely affected by West Nile virus die, while about 15 percent of all polio patients died due to severe brain stem encephalitis called “bulbar polio”.

On August 13, 2002, Lawrence Altman reported in the New York Times that New Yorkers admitted to hospital with West Nile encephalitis in 1999 have lasting symptoms: two-thirds have chronic fatigue, half report difficulty with walking and memory, 44% have muscle weakness, and more than one-third are depressed. These percentages are lower than those in polio survivors reporting Post-polio Sequelae, the unexpected and often disabling symptoms – overwhelming muscle fatigue, muscle weakness, muscle and joint pain, sleep disorders, heightened sensitivity to anaesthesia, cold and pain, and difficulty swallowing and breathing – that occur in paralytic and non-paralytic polio survivors about 35 years after the poliovirus attack.

Assistant NYC Health Commissioner, Marcelle Layton, said, “Many people don’t realise that (West Nile) is not an infection that you always get over.” Despite the similarities between West Nile and polio, why are those who had WNV believed when they complain of lasting fatigue and muscle weakness – even depression – while doctors don’t “believe” PPS exists. Scores of autopsies performed in the 1940s showed that the encephalitis caused by the poliovirus was far more common and severe than is West Nile encephalitis. If West Nile encephalitis can cause chronic fatigue, memory loss, and depression, why do doctors think it impossible that polioencephalitis can produce the debilitating fatigue that is the most common PPS symptom, or that other encephalitis-causing agents – such as the Coxsackie viruses – can be responsible for fatigue and memory loss in those with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome?

And what will happen to the reported twenty percent of West Nile patients who have “only a mild case of the flu” and are never diagnosed with WNV? Twenty-two percent of those infected with poliovirus 50 years ago only had flu-like symptoms, often don’t know that they had polio or were diagnosed with “non-paralytic” polio, and are reporting PPS symptoms today. Thirty years from now will undiagnosed West Nile patients who report fatigue and weakness find themselves in the same situation as polio survivors,

disbelieved and told that they are malingering or that the symptoms are “all in their heads?”

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of America’s worst polio epidemic when nearly 60,000 were stricken. So far in 2002 six people have been paralysed by WNV. Let this polio anniversary and West Nile patients symptoms remind doctors that many different viruses can permanently damage the brain and spinal cord and cause lasting symptoms, including fatigue, memory loss, and muscle weakness. Let us hope that acceptance of PPS and CFS as post-encephalitic syndromes will prevent West Nile patients from being disbelieved and dismissed if they develop “Post-West Nile Syndrome” thirty-five years from now.

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