



The SSV Museum's Iron Lung - a Nurse's Notes



By Anne Rudin

Anne Rudin wrote this article for the iron lung exhibit at the Sierra Sacramento Valley Museum of Medical History. Her late husband, Dr. Ed Rudin, was editor of SSV Medicine.

AS A STUDENT NURSE at Temple University Hospital, I had an affiliation in communicable diseases at Philadelphia Municipal Hospital. That was where individuals with the usual childhood diseases were quarantined. We knew that they would get well and one day go home.

But this was an extraordinary opportunity to learn more about the dreaded disease known as infantile paralysis and how it affected people, whose prognosis was a mystery. My training predated the discoveries made by the doctors Sabin and Salk, and poliomyelitis was endemic, soon becoming epidemic and greatly feared. The etiology was still speculative, the means of transmission uncertain, and, accordingly, there was no known prevention or cure.

The polio wards were filled with children and young adults with varying degrees of severity of the disease. Those whose arms and legs were affected were treated with "Kenny packs"¹ several times a day - application of squares of woolen blanket material dipped in steaming hot water, along with "re-education" of the muscles through passive exercise.

Those whose intercostal muscles were paralyzed were placed in respirators - giant metal capsules powered by electricity that created a negative pressure in the chamber, pumping rhythmically with huge gasps, day and night. Only the heads of patients were exposed, A small mirror mounted above them enabled them to see what was going on around them. On the side of the machine were portholes for the caregivers to reach in to provide essential nursing care such as bed baths, medication and massages.

At each respirator there was a nurse in constant attendance for each of three shifts, 24 hours a day. One never left the patient's side for one moment without a relief nurse. Our chief responsibility was to keep our patients as comfortable as possible and be alert to any emergency that might arise. If the patient was unable to swallow, tube feeding and aspiration of secretions was necessary. Occasionally we would move the patient's limbs to prevent decubitus ulcers or muscle cramps. And, of course, we did our best to keep up our patients' spirits, writing letters to family members for them, chatting about the news of the day, and even reading to them.

In the event of a power outage, caused by an occasional summer thunder and lightening storm, all nurses and other attendants sprang into action, taking over the pumping function manually until power was restored. Thanks to the development of polio vaccines by Dr. Albert Sabin and Dr. Jonas Salk, the iron lung can be seen today only in museums such as this.

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1. Named after Sister Elizabeth Kenny; the "sister" was an Australian Army Nurse Corps title.

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