

## SEE JANE

(This article will be published in the August issue of GLEANINGS, the newsletter of the Nebraska Polio Survivors Association.)

by Millie Lill

See Jane walk. See Jane limp, stagger, grit her teeth and nearly fall. Jane is a polio survivor and very proud that she doesn't use any assistive aids to keep on walking. Jane doesn't want anyone to see her as 'crippled.' Jane is under the delusion that her staggering gait, tightly clenched jaw and obvious pain make her look more normal than if she were wearing a brace and walking better or using a cane and allowing her jaw to come loose enough to give passersby a smile. Heaven forbid that she should use a power chair!

Why is Jane so stubborn? Well, she may have been told as a child that she must under all circumstances attempt to pass as someone who never even heard of polio. Most of us were told just that. Having had polio was our shameful secret. Why? Who knows. Back in the day, polio survivors were shunned as being contagious. No one knew what caused the disease and no one wanted to take a chance on 'catching' something that could kill or maim. Some of us were not allowed to play with other children, even after the acute phase of the disease was over and we were well on our way to recovery.

We were also taught that we must do all in our power to get rid of the braces, wheelchairs, and crutches that were our source of locomotion. Physical therapists were apt to say, "Do your exercises! Do you want to be in a wheelchair for the rest of your life?" The people who said that were experts in their time. They didn't know about Post Polio Sequelae.

When the polio virus hit our spinal cords, it shot-gunned throughout our bodies, killing about half our motor neurons. These are the 'messengers' that send messages to and from our brains and operate our muscles. During the recovery phase of polio, these little messengers had to split themselves into smaller sprouts to be able to keep contact between the brain and those muscle fibers that had lost their own delivery service. Age, being the harridan she is, kills off our motor neurons in time, and those that were smaller and thinner died sooner. After thirty or forty years of doing double the work they were designed for, these little delivery boys were forced to retire, leaving our muscle fibers with no way to get a message to the brain. The muscles were still there, but they were isolated with no way to communicate with the brain, thus unable to move. Post Polio was now a fact of life.

Now let's think about Jane's spine itself. Let's suppose that the shotgun got most of the muscles in Jane's leg and also stunted its growth. Jane has been walking with one leg shorter than the other for about 40 yrs. Her spine, her hips and her other leg have all adapted to this situation. Our bodies are marvelous in that they do adapt. So Jane's other leg has worked overtime. It's neurons are getting weaker. Her spine is twisted to accommodate the difference in leg lengths and it is getting tired. If she has used crutches or a cane for awhile, her arms and shoulders are getting weaker, too. Arms were never designed to do the heavy work that legs were meant to do. Jane is in pain.

Here is where Jane should consider her future and get a motorized wheelchair. Not a manual chair that would require her already overworked hands and arms to work even harder. No, a power chair is best. If she uses the power chair for such things as

shopping, walking the dog, going to the mall, she will still be able to get up and walk around the house. She will have energy to enjoy life. Her husband will appreciate the fact that she has energy to share with him. Nothing is more hazardous to one's love life than starting to snore in the middle of the festivities. Her hands and arms will not be used up in a futile effort to look 'normal.' Jane will be able to do her own personal care and not have to have someone else take care of her toilet every day.

See Jane scoot around in her power chair. See Jane smile. See Jane zip through the mall, able to go into every store she wants to visit. Maybe not that store where they sell all the delicate glass objects and have aisles so narrow a person can barely squeeze through without brushing the merchandise. Although Jane may enjoy just stopping in the entry way with her big powerful chair and watching the clerks go into panic mode. I do.

*(This article will be published in the August issue of GLEANINGS, the newsletter of the Nebraska Polio Survivors Association. Thank you Gleanings for allowing us to post this article here.)*

\* \* \* \* \*

[back to previous page](#)