

# Maine Voices: New outbreaks stir memories of long night with polio patient

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By Robert E. McAfee Special to the Press Herald

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As a young intern, just out of medical school, I helped care for one of the last patients with active polio at Maine Medical Center. Summers were scary times in Maine; swimming pools and beaches were closed, movies and mass gatherings were discouraged. The Salk vaccine – “the shot” – had become available only recently, and huge clinics were held all over Maine to vaccinate the entire population, adults as well as children. But some, for various reasons, fell through the cracks.

One of those was Peter, 12, the only child of a hardworking Maine farm couple. Peter was admitted on full precautions with complete paralysis of his left leg and beginning weakness on the right. My assignment, every hour, was to assist the nurse in replacing the hot packs on his affected areas and then determine the level of his paralysis as it ascended his body. If it reached his breathing muscles, I was to bring our newest Pulmonator – the “iron lung” – into the room, place Peter in it and plug in the noisy motor, allowing the machine to simulate breathing by forcing air in and out of his lungs.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Robert E. McAfee**, M.D., is a retired surgeon, a former president of the American Medical Association and a resident of Portland.

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Each time one entered Peter’s room, one donned a cloth gown, cloth cap and mask and gloves. This was before disposable gowns were available. As one left, all of the gowns, etc., were placed in a special hamper that was taken directly to the laundry for sterilization before returning to the floor.

After each visit, I went to the solarium at the end of the floor where Peter’s parents spent the night to inform them of his condition. I quickly ran out of optimism as the disease progressed. I even asked myself if I really wanted to be a doctor if this is what it entailed.

Finally, toward dawn, the paralysis leveled off and even receded a bit. I quickly went to the parents to share the good news. They were sitting together on a small sofa, holding hands. Their tears of sadness and guilt were quickly replaced by tears of joy and gratitude. A group hug followed.

Peter stayed in the hospital for a few weeks for rehab. I never saw him again after discharge, although I received a nice Christmas card from the family thanking us for his care and telling me Peter was back to full activity, save for slight weakness in his left leg.

Over the course of my practice, a Maine doctor died of tetanus after working in his rose garden; a baby died of measles meningitis; an adult with mumps became sterile; and many unvaccinated children contracted diphtheria and pertussis and had to be placed in the three-bed “fog room” on P2A as the only source of high-humidity air we had. All of these illnesses could have been prevented.

Now, after years or even decades of their absence, we’ve seen, in Maine, recurrence of pertussis, chickenpox, measles and, recently, mumps. I am concerned that other viruses will find our vulnerable population.

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And so I ask – no, plead – with today’s parents who are making the decision regarding vaccination that they first have a discussion with their doctor, their nurse practitioner, their public health expert – people who have devoted their lives to seeking the truth amid the false information out there on the internet.

Then and only then can parents say that they have done their best to care for their most precious asset – their son or daughter. Their neighbor’s child will also thank them. I think Peter’s parents would agree.

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