

BRAVING POLIO – A Sociological Study of Polio Victims in Jaipur

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Abstract

Health has been a matter of concern from times immemorial. People have tried to maintain a healthy body by taking care of it and by seeking advice from those who have expert medical knowledge. Infectious diseases have proved disastrous for society since ages and stopping their spread has been of utmost importance. Polio is one of the most dreaded infectious diseases which mostly affects children under the age of five. It causes partial or total paralysis. It has been causing havoc across the world. Some polio patients who are permanently affected are forced to lead their lives on crutches or wheelchairs while others recover and try to lead a normal life with some deformities when the movement in the limbs returns.

This paper includes the case studies of four polio survivors of Jaipur who have braved polio. They are trying their best to face life's harsh situations bravely and lead a contented life. The paper seeks to understand life from their perspective and to find out the motivating factors in their otherwise challenging life.

KEYWORDS: Health, Infectious Disease, National Immunization Days

INTRODUCTION

Health is a metaphor for well being. To be healthy means to be of sound mind and body; to be integrated; to be whole. Over time and across societies, influential theorists have emphasized that health consists of balance, of being centered.¹ The concept of health can be applied to human parts, as when we say, 'Your mother has a healthy heart' or 'your father has a healthy psyche'.² More generally, health refers to a holistic notion of individual well being^{3/4}, when we say that 'They are a healthy people,' we use a metaphor to imply that this group has a balance, coherence, and that they can be trusted.⁵

A sociological understanding emphasizes the influence of people's social backgrounds on the quality of their health and health care. A society's culture & social culture also affect health and health care. Different sociologists have different perspectives on health. They have different approaches to health according to their views and opinions.

CLASSICAL APPROACHES TO HEALTH

1. **The Functionalist Approach** emphasizes that good health and effective health care are essential for a society's ability to function and it views the physician – patient relationship as hierarchical. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements (namely norms, customs, traditions and institutions), much like the interacting organs within the human body. Some prominent functionalist theorists are Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore have emphasized that good health & effective medical health are essential for a society's ability to function. Ill health impairs our ability to perform our

roles in society and if too many people are unhealthy, society's functioning and stability suffer. This was specially true for premature death because it prevents individuals from fully carrying out all their social roles and thus represents a "poor return" to society for the various costs of pregnancy, birth, child care, and socialization of the individual who ends up dying early.⁶ Poor medical care is likewise dysfunctional for society, as people who are ill face greater difficulty in becoming healthy and people who are healthy are more likely to become ill.

2. **The Conflict Approach** emphasizes inequality in the quality of health and the quality of health care. Of the classical founders of social science, conflict theory is most commonly associated with Karl Marx, who posited that capitalism would inevitably produce internal tensions leading to its own destruction.

The Marxist approach believes that the health and health care services are specially taken care of to help the rich people gain profit and they don't benefit the poor at all. This approach believes that the health and social care of the service users should be maintained in order for them to quickly get back to work so that they can make profit for the bourgeoisies. In order to maintain the social hierarchy the government purposely ignores the selling of products which can harm one's body for example, cigarettes, tobacco etc.

The conflict approach emphasizes inequality in the quality of health and health-care delivery.⁷ Society's inequities along social class, race and ethnicity, and gender lines are reproduced in our health and health care. People from disadvantaged social background are more likely to become ill and once they do become ill, inadequate health care makes it more difficult for them to become well. This approach also criticizes physicians by saying that they call social problems as medical problems and have been controlling the practice of medicines for many years.

3. **The Interactionalist Approach** emphasizes that health & illness are social constructions; physical and mental conditions have little or no objective reality but instead are considered healthy or ill conditions only if they are defined as such by a society and its members.^{8/9}

The interactionalist approach, now called the symbolic interactionist approach has also provided important studies of the interaction between patients and health care professionals. Physicians often display their authority over the patients and they use complex terms to describe a patient's illness instead of simple terms which can be understood by patients.

Post modernist view of health and ill-health:

Health and ill-health is a growing concern in postmodernism societies. Individuals need to think of new ways of accessing healthcare provisions and perhaps even explore non-traditional options such as alternative medicine. The uncertainty of life in post modernist society can lead to growing health problems.

The study of health is thus not a new feat in society. Since ages, human beings have tried to seek advice from those who are experts in healing or those who have medical knowledge. Stopping the spread of infectious disease was of utmost importance for maintaining a healthy society.¹⁰

The outbreaks of infectious diseases in different parts of the world have proved to be disastrous. The most serious communicable diseases on the global level are Hepatitis, Influenza, Malaria, Tuberculosis, HIV/Aids and Polio.

Polio is a highly infectious disease that primarily affects children under the age of five and can cause paralysis within hours. The poliovirus enters the body through the mouth, multiplies in the throat and after entering the blood stream attacks the spinal cord and thus the motor nerves are destroyed. Children living in crowded and unhygienic conditions where clean drinking water is unavailable usually catch this disease very fast. And India, with a high population density and poor sanitation facilities makes a perfect breeding place for the polio virus.

This makes it clear that the polio virus spreads more in areas where population is more, ignorance about the consequences of deadly diseases is prevalent and the standard of living is low. That brings polio in direct connection with the under privileged and marginalized section of the society. People belonging to this section of society sometimes live in unhealthy surroundings where one can see refuse flowing in open sewers and their children are malnourished too. The polio vaccine does not give them the same immunity as it gives to healthy children of better established families.

Polio has been causing trauma in the lives millions of people across the world. Though some people recovered from polio, many suffered partial or total paralysis and even death. Many polio survivors were disabled for life. They were a visible, painful reminder to society of the enormous toll this disease took on young lives.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative, a partnership between WHO, UNICEF, Rotary and CDC was launched to eradicate polio from the world, and at the same time strengthen health infrastructure. The initiative has achieved significant progress towards both these goals. Today polio has been eradicated from many countries of the world including India.

Prior to the magnificent Polio Eradication Program in India, the World Health Organization recorded 23,800 cases of polio in India. This was the year 1988 when polio eradication was formally adopted by the World Health Assembly as a global goal. Since the launch of National Immunization Days in 1995, the number of polio cases reduced drastically by 99.5% from 500 cases a day. The polio eradication program proved to be the best health program of India. And then after about sixteen years India's success in eradicating polio was achieved and its critics who had predicted that polio eradication was an impossible project, were silenced. The last case of polio was identified in January, 2011 and in March, 2014 we got our certificate from the World Health Organization.....India Is Polio Free!

While an attack of polio lasts a short time recovery from it can take a long time. Sometimes the movement in the limbs returns, unless they are permanently affected. Such kind of patients show a great possibility to live life in a better way than those who are forced to live the rest of their lives on wheelchairs and surgeries.

This presentation includes the case studies of four polio survivors of Jaipur who have braved the dreadful disease and are now leading happy and contented lives. They have tried to cope with the long term effects of polio. These survivors have shown a great capacity to recover mentally from this disease. They have tried to be mentally healthy, which is very important.

AIMS OF THE STUDY –

- To identify the challenges faced by polio victims.
- To analyze the nature of inter personal relationships of these victims with family, peer-group and society.
- To identify the motivating factors in their life which helped them stand apart in the crowd.
- To understand life from their perspective.

METHODOLOGY

Area And Universe

- Area selected for the purpose of study was Jaipur City.
- Case studies were conducted on four polio victims.

TOOLS FOR DATA COLLECTION

Utmost care was taken while collecting the data during field work so as to maintain objectivity and gather appropriate facts so that the objectives and purposes of the study are met with. The following tools were used for the purpose of study:

- Case study: As in this research four different polio victims had to be observed, case study proved to be a beneficial technique of data collection.
- Unstructured Interview: Due to the qualitative nature of study, it was assumed that besides case study, the respondents should be given freedom to talk. They were thus asked various questions which required unrestricted answers.
- Secondary Sources: These sources helped in providing certain information which may be difficult to obtain otherwise. Besides, these sources also helped in supplementing the information acquired through primary sources as well as providing a guidance to the investigator.

Research Questions:

- What are the challenges that the polio victims had to face in childhood?
- How did they adjust themselves in the family and in society?
- What difficulties did they face during the course their studies?

- What changes has marriage brought in their life?
- What are the motivating factors in their life?
- How much are they concerned about their children's health and overall development?
- What is their perspective towards life?

CASE STUDY 1

Bhagwan Chhatnani works as a clerk in a Computer Typing and Printing Institute at Mansarovar, Jaipur. Diagnosed with polio at the age of five and the struggles that he had to face after the death of his parents and he being the eldest of seven brothers and sisters, he has seen the bitter side of life closely.

He remembers how his parents told him that they thought that the polio vaccine had harmful effects due to the negative views of the people residing in their locality. They missed the opportunity of giving the little Bhagwan the essential vaccine which could have prevented him from this dreadful disease. But he has no ill-feelings or resentment for anyone. He says this was destined to happen, so why blame anyone.

Today he feels happy and remarks that he has learnt one of the best lessons of life from that incident. With his dimpled cheeks he remarks that he has always tried to be an alert and vigilant father to his only daughter. She is a smart and confident teenager who is a class topper and an excellent classical dancer. He takes great interest in her day to day activities.

Life has not been easy for him. He has been a victim of both poverty and polio. But due to the never-say-no-spirit and the constant support of his wife, who is also a polio survivor, he has learnt to fight and come out victorious in every conflicting situation of life. His brothers and sisters have been a source of strength and joy to him. He owes much gratitude to his uncle (father's brother) and his aunt who have supported him and his younger brothers and sisters after their parents death. It was they who have shaped his life and he considers himself fortunate to have such benevolent people in his life.

He has been to school till the 11th standard and was forced to discontinue his studies due to financial problems. He does not remember anyone bullying him or teasing him as he was not able to walk properly. His sweet nature has always been a source of happiness for everyone around him. He has been a special child in school and till date he has the ability to win hearts of all those who come in contact with him.

He whole heartedly appreciates the untiring efforts of Rotary International in eradicating polio and dreams of his daughter growing up to be a doctor and assisting Rotary in its humanitarian projects.

CASE STUDY 2

Reena Joshi, a teacher by profession, is one of the most loving and talented teachers of Merryland's School, Jaipur. She remembers the unlucky day when she was five – after falling down thrice – while playing – her right leg was detected with polio.

She clearly remembers the hardships that her family had to go through when she was small, the trauma that her parents had to face after polio attacked her. Being the youngest and the most beautiful of seven brothers and sisters she has sweet memories of the love and pampering she received in the family, despite this handicap in life. She has been educated in one of the best schools of Jammu inspite of the unfavourable financial condition of the family.

Marriage with a person who has the same disease has made her understand life in a better way. Journey of life in her view, has been smooth and without any obstacles due to an encouraging and caring life partner who understands her better than anyone else.

She admits humbly that her daughter is her biggest fan and her son is her biggest strength. They have always supported her and stand by her in times of joy and sorrow.

The principal of the school that Reena is working in is all praise for her and always trusts her decisions regarding the school activities. Her husband and her inlaws find in her a friend, guide and motivator. And for her kids 'she is the best mom in the world'. She takes care of their studies and their curricular activities.

And Reena, despite being a polio victim herself – with inability to walk properly – makes it a point to convey to all parents of her neighbourhood and to teachers and parents of her school to be vigilant to give polio drops to their kids especially on National Immunization Days. She says the pulse polio campaigns must continue till the disease is eradicated from the world.

Case Study – 3

Divakar Joshi is a confident and hardworking L.I.C. employee. He has no regrets in life and does not blame anyone for this condition but certainly thinks that had his parents been a little more precautious he would have been able to run with his children in the hill stations that they recently visited.

He informs he was five when he suffered from fever followed by paralysis of the limbs which eventually resulted in polio in the left leg. He has been an intelligent student and did well in his studies and remembers school as a friendly place with encouraging teachers and motivating friends. He does not remember anyone being rude or harsh to him. He admits that though his childhood has been physically painful sometimes, mentally he was never tortured. His family members, especially his mother has been the source of his strength and has always boosted his morale as well as his sister's morale, who is a polio victim too. Living in a loving and cooperative joint family has taught him the lessons of service, sacrifice, compassion and affection.

He remembers, with much excitement, the day when he first saw his life partner – she is a polio victim too – her beauty and innocence, coupled with her dedication towards her work – become the channel of their life-long bonding. They have two smart and healthy children – a daughter who is studying in St. Angela Sophia School and a son who is in St. Xaviers.

When asked whether his children were given pulse polio drops regularly, he has a positive reply along with an information that both he and his wife have been advocating to administer polio drops to the kids of their friends, relatives and neighbours.

He talks highly of the untiring efforts of the National Government and the Rotary Pulse Polio Programs in eradicating polio and remarks sadly, had the government and the local authorities been active at that time and our parents a little more alert, his life would have been different. But at the next moment beams with a radiant smile – saying that his kids are proud of him and are his biggest support.

His wife Reena is an optimist and is satisfied with all that life has given to them. She happily admits that she is treated with love and respect by everybody. They live in a joint family and her in-laws have never been unkind or rude to her because of her disability. She has always been the center of attraction and affection in the family.

CASE STUDY 4

Dr. Anshuman Suresh Jamdade, Professor, Department of Oral Medicine and Radiology, Mahatma Gandhi Dental College and Hospital, Jaipur, has polio in the right leg and he uses crutches to walk. He says he was 7 ½ months old when this dreadful disease attacked him as he was injected with an unsterilized polio syringe.

He has been a merit holder in his academic career – he proudly owes this achievement to his mother who was a teacher in a village in Maharashtra. In fact she has been influential in shaping his career. He beams with pride when he shares that his father was a disciplinarian and educationist and whatever he is today, is because of the wonderful upbringing in the family.

He says life after his mother's death has been full of discipline and concentration towards studies as he was put in a boarding school. Being a dynamic teacher's son has helped him a lot to overcome the obstacles of his life with courage. He has been a topper in the school right from class one and thus has no reminder of any teacher ill-treating him or any classmate or schoolmate teasing or bullying him because of his handicap. He smiles like a little child when he says he has been every teacher's favourite.

Life with permanent crutches has been full of challenges for Dr. Anshuman. He remembers the day when he was selected for the B.D.S. interview and the panel asked him whether he would be able to stand for long hours, if required, for dental surgery. A confident 'YES' was ready at that moment, which is present till date. His never say no attitude has made him a favourite with everyone around.

The most challenging part of life for any polio patient or any handicapped person – marriage – created a lot of unhappiness and resentment in his life. No one was ready to marry him although he was good looking, educated and well established by that time. He sadly says that he did not expect this and it came to him as a shock that no normal girl wanted to accept a polio patient with crutches as her husband. He feels happy to share that he has chosen a companion who is a social worker and who loves to work for the sick and suffering and who can go out of her way to help the needy.

After polio has weakened his leg, all the more, due to which he is not able to stand for long hours, he has left surgery and has taken up the teaching part of oral medicine. He has tutored his wife efficiently who after completing her B.Sc. has now cleared the B.D.S. exam and would very soon be a Dental Surgeon due to his efforts. He has a radiant smile on his face and says with pride that she would be a very good surgeon.

He has fond memories of the affectionate and motivating members of the Rotary International – The Rotary team with their doctors came to his village Satara, in Maharashtra, and he was operated upon so that he could walk a little better on crutches..... Years later, he remembers he was selected to operate poor people of a remote village in the Rotary Camps!

Blessed with two beautiful and healthy daughters Dr. Anshuman has no regrets in life. He thanks his parents, his teachers and his friends who have always motivated him to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor. His wife who is his best friend and guide, respects him and his principles. Together they are determined to groom their daughters to be worthy citizens of India.

A wonderful human being, a dynamic doctor, a motivating husband, a caring father, Dr. Anshuman is a perfect example of courage and determination. Call it calculated optimism!

CONCLUSION

- Polio was one of the most dreaded childhood diseases of the 20th century.
- It has crippled and paralyzed thousands of people mostly young/children.
- Some of the polio patients who have braved polio are now leading a happy and contented life.
- The above mentioned polio survivors are a living example for the rest of the polio victims, the handicapped people and even the normal ones.
- They have not only tried to cope up with the long term after effects of polio but have also shown a great capacity to recover mentally from this disease.
- They have become symbols of courage and strength to society.
- They are trying their level best to stand apart in the crowd on the basis of their talents and hard-work.
- The case study of these polio survivors has proved that their parents were ignorant about polio, the deadly disease and its consequences. They also had misconceptions about the polio vaccinations. They were not aware enough to realize that due to their negligence in taking proper care of their children's health, this disease would cause havoc in their lives.
- Having learnt a lesson from their parents mistakes, these polio survivors are determined to bring up their children in the best possible way.
- They are quite conscious about their children's health and over all personality development.
- They have become advocates of pulse polio programmes.

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Magazines/Booklets

- Rotary's "End Polio How" Campaign Hand Book.
- Rotary Advocacy with a difference, New Delhi, India, Rotary International Polio Plus Society.

Internet Resources

- www.postpolio.org.nz
- www.rotary.org
- www.rotaryindia.org
- www.who.int
- www.historyofvaccines.org
- www.forbes.com