

Richard Owen – He went from polio patient to pioneering physician

by [Jane McClure](#) // January 10th, 2012

The recent death of Dr. Richard R. Owen reminds us of how polio treatment and the perceptions of those with polio have changed. Owen, an Eden Prairie resident, died Dec. 11 at age 83.



He was a polio survivor who founded the Post-Polio Clinic at Sister Kenny Institute in Minneapolis. He practiced in many area hospitals and clinics and retired as the medical director of Sister Kenny Institute. Many regard him as a guru and pioneer in post-polio treatment. He shared his knowledge and experiences in many articles and talks, as well as in treatment of patients. Polio survivors owe him gratitude for improving their quality of life.

The days when polio was greatly feared are a fading memory. But those are days Owen recalled all too well. When he contracted polio as a youngster in Indianapolis, little was known about the disease and how people could live with it. Owen recalled those days, writing about it in 2003 for the University of Minnesota's Institute of

Community Integration's Impact newsletter.

“In 1940, at age 12, I contracted polio. Muscles in my legs and torso were paralyzed and then left weakened, and I was no longer able to stand or walk unsupported. Ten months later, and two months after I had begun standing and walking in braces and on crutches, my family went on a vacation into the northern Ontario wilderness. Within a few hours of arriving at Mongoose Lake at Mile 78 on the Algoma Central Railroad, my crutches slipped on a mossy log and I fell into the lake. That immersion was my reintroduction to the wilderness and reinclusion in a favorite family activity. That early return to a challenging physical activity helped me overcome many of the misgivings I had about my ‘limitations’ and more quickly reintegrate into family life, public schools, and society.”

As a young polio patient Owen was treated by Sister Kenny herself.

In a newsletter he also recalled how polio changed his recreational experiences. “Before my disability, I had enjoyed baseball, football, biking, and exploring with other children in the neighborhood. In the early 1940s, there were no organized adapted athletic programs in the schools or in the parks to allow me to continue these physical recreation activities, so until the

1970s my athletic and recreation endeavors consisted of swimming, canoeing, and camping with my family.”

Owen became a wheelchair athlete and medical examiner for wheelchair athletes. He took many trips through Wilderness Inquiry and served on that organization’s board.

Owen also used his experiences not only to help others with polio, but to give perspective on how treatment had changed. In David M. Oshinsky’s book *Polio: An American Story*, Owen recalled how polio patients were treated at teaching hospitals in the 1940s and 1950s. There, “clad only in little cloth things that hardly covered us and our embarrassment,” polio patients became perfect subjects for clinical demonstration.

“For many of us,” Owen added, “the acute illness and convalescence was during adolescence with the impact of polio superimposed on all the usual stresses and strains of growing up. Barriers to building, activities, opportunities, and associations added to frustration and, in some cases, social isolation of young people with the residuals of poliomyelitis. Many barriers . . . were self-imposed. Various coping mechanisms often covered true feelings of loss. Denial often led to distorted reality.”

A memorial service for Owen was held Dec. 17 at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis. He is survived by wife, Amy; sister, Suzy Brickley; daughter, Marnie; sons, Rick (Ann), and Don (Meg); grandchildren, Lauren Lusk (Jeremy), David Jacobs, David, and Rebecca; as well as many other relatives. Memorials can be made to the Sister Kenny Foundation, First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, or Wilderness Inquiry.

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