

# 'My Story'

**Valerie Foster**

**M**y full name is Mary Valerie Foster. I am retired now, but I used to be a podiatrist for the health authority in Bournemouth. I was born in Wrexham in Denbighshire, in July 1928.

## Meningitis

After two years working in a bank as a bank clerk I realised my ambition to go to Guy's Hospital to start my nursing training. And it was after 2 years in my nurses training that I contracted TB and meningitis and then I was ill for 3 years. At the end of that time, I had no hearing at all. I lost my hearing as a result of the treatment. I contracted TB and I was sent off sick. And then I was in an oxygen tent for some time; which is a terrible experience. Then I started having streptomycin. It was the early days of streptomycin called dihydrostreptomycin, and a specialist came from Oxford, a specialist in meningitis. Then someone came from New Zealand and I had the punctures in my neck. Then they made the two burr holes in my head. Every day I used to have the lumbar puncture needle put straight into the ventricle in my brain, and the cerebral spinal fluid drawn out and the streptomycin and the penicillin put in, then I'd go to sleep and feel it go round my brain, then wake up and not be able to hear.

I don't know how long that went on for before they decided that my hearing wasn't coming back. They sent me for hearing tests. And they didn't ever say that my hearing wouldn't come back, but I don't think very much was known about it at that time. But of course they didn't talk about hair cells in those days, and I understood since then that it was the streptomycin that destroys the hair cells in the cochlea, which inactivates the auditory nerve.

The consultant said to me "would you like to wear a hearing aid so that people know you are deaf?" I said "No thank you. People expect me to hear if they see me wearing a hearing aid." In those days the batteries were that big you wore them hanging between your legs like that! So, I never wore a hearing aid. There was no point in having a hearing aid; I had nothing to amplify, nothing at all.

## Recovery

When I was recovering from my illness at Guy's Hospital they sent me to the Isle of Wight to the Royal National Hospital, where they put me in a room on my own. Completely on my own. And all you could see from that room was your balcony and the sea on the south coast, and I think that was probably the worse possible thing you could do for a person that just lost their hearing. And it became Christmas time, and my family were a long way away, nobody visited me. I used to go out to the stairs outside the room, and sit on the stairs at night crying, and crying. It came to Christmas Day, and we had to walk along a tunnel to the dining room, and only on Christmas Day were the sexes allowed to mix. You know, the men and women were allowed to sit together. Only on one day a year.

## Feelings

I felt I was the only one in the world that had lost my hearing. You know? Although being young you do have a more optimistic attitude but I was still having those very, very severe headaches long after the meningitis had gone.

I was very conscious of my disability not being able to socialise like I used to because I was fond of music when I could hear. I don't know how I did it really.

## Interventions

I have a smoke alarm, alarm system, door bell system; I had mine installed by social services. A computer, use email a lot, yes I've have had a text phone right from the beginning of the telephone exchange for the deaf in Gower Street in London.

I wouldn't consider having a hearing dog when I had already got a dog and a cat. I see how terribly involved and dependent you get on a hearing dog. I feel that I could not go through the trauma of my dog not living as long as I do, and you know when it comes to retirement age and friends of mine have had hearing dogs, whose dogs have died and it's like losing a child. And I just feel I could not go through with the emotions of it. But I would love a dog. But I resist having one.

I have just started going back to lipreading classes. I am so annoyed about the education authority charging so much for lipreading. I very much resent having to pay the fee although I really realise how much my lipreading has slipped, because I live alone. And how useful, how interesting the lipreading classes are. You do meet people and they are people worth knowing. I am amazed that people will travel so far when they are older and pay so much to lipread when it should be free.



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