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Polio struck this Pennsylvania man when he was just 7, he helped Dr. Salk develop vaccine

Joe Randig Your Turn

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August is National Immunization Month, an annual observance held to highlight the importance of routine vaccination for all people of all ages. My first experience with the word "immunization" came on April 25, 1954, at the age of 7 when Dr. Jonas Salk gave me an injection of his newly developed polio vaccine. April 1954 was the start of the polio vaccine field trials. Thousands of children throughout the country would take part and become known as "Polio Pioneers."

I was in my second week of first grade in 1952 when I got polio. The year 1952 was the last epidemic year for polio with 58,000 cases being reported in the United States. Many of those children lived with the results of polio for the remainder of their lives and many others died.

After six weeks in isolation at Municipal Hospital in Pittsburgh I was transferred to the D.T. Watson Home in Sewickley. Dr. Salk had a close relationship with the Watson Home. In the spring of 1952 he had conducted some early testing of his polio vaccine there. A small group of parents volunteered their children who had polio and were living at the Watson Home for rehabilitation.



Here, Joe Randig received the polio vaccine from Dr. Jonas Salk in 1955, the day after the approval of the Salk vaccine. Salk gave Randig and his family the vaccine at the D.T. Watson Home in Sewickley. They were the first Butler County residents to get the vaccine and his family was part of a vaccine follow-up study that lasted two years, he said. Unfortunately, the vaccine arrived three years after Randig contracted polio in 1952.
PROVIDED BY JOE RANDIG

When the field trials started in the spring of 1954, Dr. Salk returned to the Watson Home seeking volunteers to be injected with his polio vaccine. I was still an inpatient there, so my parents decided to volunteer our family, feeling strongly that it was the right thing to do. Before we were given the polio vaccine blood was drawn to determine if we had the polio antibody in our blood. This was all done under the close supervision of Dr. Salk.

More: [Polio is back, PA survivors recall its terrible toll, urge vaccination](#)

Over the spring and summer of 1954, we were injected with three doses of the polio vaccine. Through the next six years my family would make the annual 60-mile round trip from Butler to Sewickley so they could draw our blood to monitor the continued presence of the polio antibody.

Toward the end of Dr. Salk's monitoring of what became known as the "Watson Home Group," he sent out a letter of appreciation to all participants. Here are a few quotes from that letter on University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine stationery dated May 1961:

"You must know how important has been your contribution to the development of the polio vaccine. You know, too of my deep appreciation for the spirit in which you volunteered and for your willingness to submit to the procedures required to obtain the information we needed. ...It was this

group that made possible the development of the polio vaccine prior to the large scale field-trials. ...I am, of course pleased that our studies on polio are coming to an end. However I will miss the opportunity to see you each year. ...It gives us faith that people can sacrifice and cooperate — not only for their own well-being but to help advance knowledge that will be of benefit to others as well."



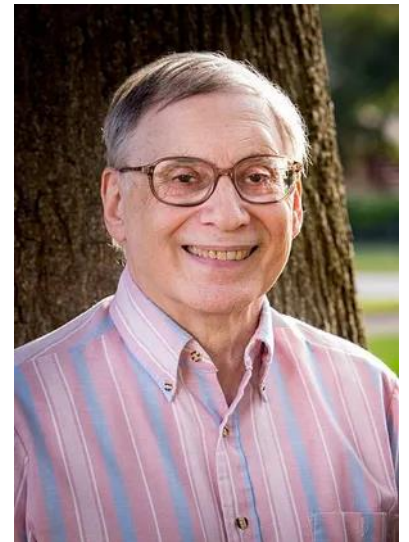
Joe Randig, 6, is pictured with his crutches during a 1953 weekend home visit to Butler. PROVIDED BY JOE RANDIG

—Jonas E. Salk, M.D.

Erie County residents should know that the Erie County Immunization Coalition offers resources for those seeking information about vaccines in Erie County.

The Immunization Coalition of Erie County (ICEC) works to increase public awareness about immunizations and seek community support to achieve and maintain full immunization of all infants, children and adolescents, and adults in Erie County. ICEC aims to link immunization providers, parents and children, and community coalitions with technical support, public and professional education and community resources to fully immunize all Erie County citizens. Anyone interested in joining meetings or volunteering to be part of the coalition can call 814-451-6700, according to Walter Ang, communications specialist with the [Erie County Department of Health](#).

Joe Randig is the western Pennsylvania coordinator for the [PA Polio Survivors Network](#). Managed by polio survivors and friends, the network is in service to bring support and information to polio survivors, their families, caregivers and health care providers. The network works with many professionals providing valuable information to help educate and spread awareness about the late effects of the poliovirus, and the importance of being vaccinated against this terrible disease.



Joe Randig PROVIDED BY JOE RANDIG