

Sister Elizabeth Kenny (1880-1952)

Sister Elizabeth Kenny was born in the Australian Outback. Elizabeth was home schooled for a time and later attended school in New South Wales. She became interested in science, especially anatomy and physiology, while recovering from a broken wrist after a fall from a horse. Kenny trained as a nurse, not formally at a nursing school, but by apprenticeship with a local nurse midwife and with her mentor, Dr. Aineas McDonnell. She operated a clinic from her home and traveled to see patients by horseback.

In 1911, she was first confronted with patients presenting with what turned out to be polio. She wired Dr. McDonnell asking for help and he answered, "...treat them according to the symptoms as they present themselves." At the time, the treatment for polio involved encasing the patient in hard splints for long periods of time, with the hope of preventing deformity. Elizabeth Kenny noted that the muscles were very spastic, which she treated with heat, applied by way of heated, heavy woolen blankets wrapped around the spastic limbs. She developed a program of passive exercise to try to overcome paralysis.

During WWI. Kenny served in the Australian Army nurse corps, where she was awarded the title of "Sister". She used that title the rest of her life. After the war, she continued her community nursing and started to try to convince the medical establishment that her treatment methods resulted less often in paralysis after polio. The rejection of her methods was only partly due to suspicion of the actual technique. It was largely due to the fact that Sister Kenny was a woman, was a nurse, and actually, not even formally trained as a nurse. Therefore, the opinions of many medical experts refused to even consider her new approach. However, she was not to be deterred. She was convinced that her methods led to better outcomes. For the next thirty years, she worked to convince the world that her treatment provided better results when compared to the standard treatment. In 1937 she published a book explaining her techniques. During those years, polio epidemics swept across the United States and Europe as well as Australia. She visited England to teach her radical new therapy and convinced a few in the British medical community.

In 1940, she traveled to the United States to demonstrate the Kenny method at the Mayo Clinic. The trip was sponsored by the Australian government and members of the Australian medical community, now convinced, provided her with a letter of introduction to the Mayo clinic. As everywhere else, there were the critics who were afraid to even consider a new way. Finally, though, with the support of orthopedic physicians Miland Knapp, John Poh and Wallace Cole, her methods became widely accepted.

During the forties, polio swept across the United States and Sister Kenny's approach became the standard of care. The Sister Kenny Institute was founded during this

period and still exists today as a rehabilitation hospital. Her methods of passive exercise to retrain nerves and muscles became the foundation of modern physical therapy.

In 1946, Rosalind Russell played Sister Kenny in a movie, partly fictionalized, telling the story of her efforts to establish the new treatment.

For more information, google Sister Elizabeth Kenny, and the Sister Elizabeth Kenny Institute