



Nurse Frances Allen And The 1944 Polio Epidemic In Hickory

By: Phoebe Pollitt

Abstract

As all our lives are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is good to remember and honor a nurse who played an important role during an earlier epidemic in our state. In 1944, the national nursing workforce was seriously depleted meeting the needs of WWII. That summer, a severe polio epidemic swept through North Carolina crippling and killing thousands, mostly children. Families with stricken children headed toward Charlotte Memorial Hospital's polio ward but the hospital was soon overcrowded and closed its doors to new patients. Many of the families from the Catawba River valley made it no further than Hickory before they learned there was no room in Charlotte for their children. Hickory earned the nickname "Polio City" across the state.

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Nurse Frances Allen and the 1944 Polio Epidemic in Hickory

By NCNA member Dr. Phoebe Ann Pollitt, RN; Nursing History Council Vice Chair

As all our lives are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is good to remember and honor a nurse who played an important role during an earlier epidemic in our state.

In 1944, the national nursing workforce was seriously depleted meeting the needs of WWII. That summer, a severe polio epidemic swept through North Carolina crippling and killing thousands, mostly children. Families with stricken children headed toward Charlotte Memorial Hospital's polio ward but the hospital was soon overcrowded and closed its doors to new patients. Many of the families from the Catawba River valley made it no further than Hickory before they learned there was no room in Charlotte for their children. Hickory earned the nickname "Polio City" across the state.

In what became known as the "Miracle of Hickory" in early June 1944, doctors, nurses, and citizens of Hickory, working with staff from the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, decided to act. In less than three days they turned a local camp for underprivileged children into an emergency polio hospital. The first patients were admitted just 54 hours after the decision to create a polio hospital was made. For nine months, regardless of race, hometown, or ability to pay, the hospital cared for 454 children with polio including African Americans and one Native American child. It was likely the first non-segregated health care facility in North Carolina.

Frances Allen was the only nurse employed by the Catawba County Health Department when the epidemic began. Born in 1916 in Ellenboro, North Carolina, she graduated from Knoxville General Hospital in 1937. Nurse Allen played a vital role in the success of the "Miracle of Hickory." Here is her story in her own words:

"Doctors from Yale gave me specific instructions. Each home was to be visited to collect specimens when a new patient was admitted. ... These visits required a lot of travel from daylight to dark. I recall one visit

in Watauga County that took me up a small unpaved road. I then had to park my car and walk about one-fourth mile to the house. Of course, there were dogs to combat, but luckily no dog bites. The family proved to be very cooperative, and I collected and put on ice their specimens to take back to researchers. I traveled to Wilkes, Burke, Caldwell, and Alexander counties.

I was in the hospital every day where patients were treated by the Kenny hot pack method. Schools were closed, and children were asked to stay home rather than be in crowds. In fact, the whole town was somewhat quarantined for a time. Later, as the number of

cases became fewer, the worst cases were transferred to Charlotte Memorial Hospital."

In 1955, a vaccine for polio was developed and given to school children across the country. North Carolina made the polio vaccine mandatory for school attendance in 1959 and the horrors of polio are now mostly forgotten.

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In 1951, Allen earned her Bachelor of Science degree in public health nursing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill followed by a master's degree in nursing in 1962. She taught at Berea College in Kentucky and at Western Carolina University before returning to Hickory to teach at Lenoir Rhyne College. In 1984, Lenoir Rhyne established the Frances Allen Scholarship of Excellence in Community Health Nursing. She died in Hickory on October Oct 29, 1999.

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