Priest called Rom, suffering from poliomyelitis, makes an offering. Medicine series, modern papyrus after 18th dynasty tomb relief, c. 1500 BC. Photo Credit: Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.

The impact of polio on activity and participation can be seen in ancient Egyptian art. In this papyrus based on a 3,000-year-old stele, a priest named Rom (in other sources, a doorkeeper named Roma) has an equinus deformity of the foot and a withered leg. He leans on a staff as he balances an offering in a goblet. Some medical scholars have interpreted Rom’s deformity to be the result of polio; others believe that it is not polio but a specific type of clubfoot, with secondary wasting and shortening of the leg. The mummies of Khnumu-Nekht and the pharaoh Siptah had a clubfoot and a withered leg, much like Roma’s. As a child, Siptah was known to have contracted a disease that left him with an atrophied leg; he walked on it for several years before his bones matured.

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