

AND THE DOCTOR SAID
Stories of Health, Illness, and Medicine in
North Staffordshire



Edited by:

Mark Webster
Alannah Tomkins
Geoff Walton
Jackie Reynolds

**And The Doctor Said: Stories of Health, Illness,
and Medicine in North Staffordshire**

Edited by

**Jackie Reynolds, Alannah Tomkins,
Geoff Walton and Mark Webster**

Copyright Jackie Reynolds 2014



North Staffordshire Press Ltd
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire

**And the Doctor Said: Stories of Health, Illness, and Medicine
in North Staffordshire**

All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by photocopying or any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

ISBN 978-0-9928305-1-9

First Published in 2014
By
North Staffordshire Press
Staffordshire University
Business Village
72 Leek Road
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
United Kingdom

CONTENTS

	Page No
Introduction to 'And The Doctor Said...' project	1
Women and Healthcare with Deborah McAndrew	9
Voices of Experience with Maria Whatton	33
Local History and Healthcare with Dave Reeves	55
Life Story Writing with Chrissie Hall	97
Sharing the Stories	141
Feedback	143
What Next?	162

An Introduction to the ‘And the Doctor said....’ project

What’s it about?

‘And the Doctor Said....’ is an innovative research project, which uses creative writing as a way of exploring people’s experiences of healthcare in North Staffordshire. A series of workshops led by creative writers, playwrights and storytellers took place during 2013 in four different community venues in and around Stoke-on-Trent. Through creative writing, the participants shared, reflected on and wrote about their health experiences. The activities and writing drew upon their own personal experience and local knowledge: participants were very much at the centre of the project and this made sure that the detail of the creative work they produced was driven by the participants themselves, rather than academics. We think that this created a sense of worth and achievement, which can be built upon in the future. As you will see, the narratives generated by participants have resulted not only in creative pieces to be read and appreciated, but they also provide a rich source of research material for sociologists, historians and health experts to explore, analyse and interpret.

The workshops have resulted in diverse, interesting and poignant new creative writings that offer fresh insights and understandings of people’s experiences of health, illness and medicine in the region. This book is part of the project’s legacy,

enabling us to share the writing with you, the wider audience. We are very grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for providing the funding for this project. We would also like to thank all our partners, creative leads and most importantly the participants for making this project a rich and rewarding experience for all.

A bit about Stoke-on-Trent...

The challenges faced by the City of Stoke-on-Trent are well known, from the historical division of the six towns that make up the city, through to the economic misfortunes linked to the loss of traditional industries, such as coal mining and the potteries. These days, it's readily recognised that people's health is about much more than just the presence or absence of disease. It is affected by your age and where you work and live. Your level of income and your social networks also play a big part in shaping your experiences of health and illness. Another factor, of course, that has a huge impact on your experiences of health and particularly of illness, is the healthcare that you receive. Everyone – even the healthiest of people – has some experiences of healthcare. This project invited people to share and to write about those experiences.

North Staffordshire is well known for its industrial history but we know less about the health history of its residents. However, it is important because their health experiences link

closely to their occupational experiences, the risks and dangers they faced, the deprivation and loss of work and what this means for support from welfare services. It goes without saying that residents of urban Stoke on Trent and outlying areas have experienced a much wider range of employments than the pottery and mining industries but this industrial heritage remains and still heavily influences many people's experiences and outlook. We also wanted to capture some of the perspectives of younger participants, whose experiences might be very different to those of older people living in the area.

Why Storytelling?

Storytelling is increasingly seen as a valuable way of connecting people as human beings, and contributing to individual and community identity. It can provide links between past, present and future, and help the voices and experiences of a wide range of people to be heard and shared. Stories can also communicate very powerful messages, and there are many examples of social change happening in response to people telling their stories. In traditional approaches to research, the voice of the academic often takes over, and the participants' voices can be lost as they are analysed and interpreted by others. In this project, we wanted people to be able to tell their stories in their own words, at the same time as learning new skills in creative writing and just as importantly - having fun!

Introducing the Project Team

The project was managed by a small team of researchers. This team was led by Mark Webster (Head of School of Arts and Design, Staffordshire University), who has 30 years of experience in the delivery of applied community research. Alannah Tomkins (Senior Lecturer in History, Keele University) brought to the project a research background in the social history of medicine in North Staffordshire with an interest in practising and teaching creative writing. The team also included Geoff Walton (Lecturer in Information Science, Northumbria University), and Jackie Reynolds (Senior Researcher, Staffordshire University). The management team was guided by a steering group, which included Lisa Mansell, James Sheard and Joe Stretch (teachers and practitioners of creative writing at Staffordshire and Keele), and Penny Vincent (Staffordshire University's Creative Communities Unit).

Introducing the Creative Writers

The 'And the Doctor Said....' project was also innovative in developing partnerships between researchers and creative practitioners. We commissioned four creative leads, all of whom brought a wealth of experience and understanding to the workshops that they led. They worked with participants in groups and individually to support them to reflect on their experiences and to turn those experiences into creative writing.

Deborah McAndrew:

Deborah is a Playwright and actor with work spanning theatre, television and radio. Her original plays include King Macbeth, Vacuum, Flamingoland and Ugly Duck (published by Nick Hern Books).

Maria Whatton:

Maria is an award winning storyteller and writer. She has worked with many partners to support people to tell their stories, including the NHS, local authorities, MIND and Voices of Experience (Survivors of Domestic Violence).

Dave Reeves:

Dave has worked extensively with communities, creating collaborative texts and publishing in print, audio and digital media. He was editor of Raw Edge Magazine for 13 years, and for the past 5 years has presented the live literature show for online broadcaster Radio Wildfire.

Chrissie Hall:

Chrissie returned to study at 40, gaining a degree in Literature and Creative Writing. Her work has been published and broadcast internationally, and she has worked as a scriptwriter for the BBC 1 drama series “Doctors”. Chrissie was also Arts Council England’s Literature Officer for the East Midlands and is now a creative writing tutor.

Thanks to our hosts

We would like to thank the following organisations for hosting our workshops and making us feel so welcome:

Burslem School of Art

Emma Bridgewater

Mitchell Arts Centre

New Vic Theatre

The workshops are documented on our project website – please see www.andthedoctorsaid.org. We are grateful to Rachel Brewster and John Rosie of Unique Media Production at Staffordshire University for capturing the workshop activities and the spoken stories so well on film.

In this book we share all of the writing that was generated by the workshops. Each chapter features the work from one set of workshops. The book will conclude with our plans for the future development of the work, and with some comments from creative writers and participants about their experiences of taking part in this research project. We hope you have a rewarding experience reading these pieces. We have certainly been delighted by the positive response to the project, and by the wealth of writing that was generated by the participants. It is our job to build on this success and take the project forward to new participants and audiences.

Workshop Stories

The four sets of workshops that were developed as part of this project and themed are as follows:

Women and Healthcare with Deborah McAndrew (venue: Mitchell Arts Centre)

Deborah McAndrew worked with a group of teenaged Mums and a group of older women, in a series of four half-day workshops that took place at the Mitchell Arts Centre in Stoke-on-Trent (February-March 2013). Deborah made audio-recordings of the women discussing their healthcare experiences. She then transcribed the conversations, and worked with the group to develop a three-act audio-documentary, which was recorded on the final day.

Voices of Experience with Maria Whatton (venue: Emma Bridgewater)

Voices of Experience is a mutual support group for women who have experienced domestic abuse. The women took part in two one-day workshops led by Maria Whatton. These workshops took place in January and February 2013 at the Emma Bridgewater pottery factory in Stoke-on-Trent. On the first day, the women discussed their experiences of healthcare as a group. They began to write their pieces individually, and continued to do so between workshops. At the second

workshop they shared their writing and also chose key words or phrases that they then painted onto pottery.

Local History and Healthcare with Dave Reeves (venue: Burslem School of Art)

Dave Reeves worked with a mixed group of participants at the Burslem School of Art. He ran two one-day workshops in June and July 2013. There was a particular focus in these workshops on historical aspects of healthcare, with participants writing about their memories, for example of childhood encounters with healthcare professionals. A wide range of writing was submitted, including poetry and prose.

Life Story Writing with Chrissie Hall (venue: New Vic Theatre)

The final workshops in the project took place at the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme. Chrissie Hall worked with a mixed group of participants and supported them to write about their experiences of health and illness in north Staffordshire. There were two workshops, both in September 2013, and again, a wide variety of writing was submitted, including several longer pieces about people's lives.

We hope you find the material as interesting, moving and informative as we did.

Women and Healthcare with Deborah McAndrew

And the doctor said...

Audio Documentary script compiled from the words of *Karina, Terri-Anne, Sarah, Carol, Sue, Lynda, Gillian, Chris, Helen, Doreen*

ACT ONE

Beginnings...

The National Health Service was actually born in 1948, but there was no question of a doctor, or a midwife coming out when I was born.

I was born in May 1944 in the house next door to where I live now.

I was born in Norton. Mum came home to have me, apparently, in 1945. February 1945.

I was born in 1946 in a kind of erm...I think it was a maternity hospital – in Derbyshire.

I was born in January 1947, which apparently was one of the worst winters on record in this country.

I was born in Northern Ireland in the front bedroom of my grandmother's two-up-two-down.

I too was born at home – 1947, local midwife.

I arrived in the middle of the night and the only person there to help my mum was my grandmother.

I was born in May Bank in 1949. I just missed my Dad's birthday. He was away in the army. I missed my Dad's birthday. It was my Dad's birthday on the 18th, mine on the 19th. It was a home birth.

I was born in 1996 at North Staffs.

I was born 10th of the 2nd 1996 in Darlington, Co. Durham.

I was delivered by the local midwife in the village, called Nurse Clay, who wore, apparently Mum said, a poked knitted woollen hat.

And I was an unexpected arrival...arriving about two to three weeks early.

And that's what she remembered when she was going through labour – seeing this visage with a pokey hat on.

All I know about my birth is that I was a breach baby and I caused a lot of pain because I came out bottom first.

I was put into a drawer, wrapped up and put into a drawer – and I think three of us shared a cot.

I remember my Mum saying the midwife said – 'what are you going to call her?' and she said, 'Margaret' – and the midwife said, 'oh, Maggie, like her grandma', and my mother changed her mind.

Those of us who were born quite a long time ago – don't really know that much detail do we?

Bit of a taboo...

Our parents didn't talk to us about it though.

I remember asking my mother sometimes, 'where do babies come from?' But I never got a straight answer.

I think it was something to be ashamed of.

My mother was a student nurse before she married, and she didn't know where babies came out. She didn't know where her first baby was going to come from.

I don't think my mother knew how it got there either.

It was, I think, a generally much more painful experience for our mothers.

Well, they didn't have pain relief till the 50s, did they?

My mother, when she had her first baby, at nineteen, didn't know where it was going to come out. She didn't know – I remember her telling me. She said she was terrified. She didn't know where it was going to come out – she thought she was going to burst open. Isn't that awful?

You never talked about it.

None of us knew how heavy we were.

I have no idea.

No I don't.

And men certainly weren't involved at all.

I had my Dad and my step-mum.

There was no question of a man being present when we were born.

No.

But if you were to ask us about our experiences of giving birth – of childbirth, we could tell you in glorious Technicolor.

I had one at home.

I had two at home.

They just sort of said, 'oh put a plastic sheet on the bed', that was about it.

There was always somebody in every street.

I always wondered what they wanted all those hot water and towels for.

When the third one was born it was at home, and it started snowing and the midwife had got one of those little scooters and we were thinking, 'will she get here?'

I just remember there were two midwives because obviously you can't have one midwife on call 24 hours a day. Erm – one was really really nice, she was the one that went through the pregnancy, and the other one I was just absolutely dreading if I ended up having to have her deliver the baby.

I had four. I had a son first – well actually, he was born at home. I was supposed to go to the hospital, but he was so quick. The ambulance couldn't find where I lived – it was sort of in the middle of nowhere – they were too late, there was only my mother in law - but there was no problem.

I went into the hospital and they said, 'Oh, you'll be ages yet.' Sent my husband home...

And they just pushed me in this room and this woman – she was a midwife - she said, 'Oh, you'll be all right in there, just give us a shout when you're ready – cos you've had three, so you know what's what.' So I shouted after a while and they came and took me through.

I had a kind of long labour.

I didn't expect it to hurt so much.

Oooh my back!

You used to have to have an enema.

And shaved!

Gas and air was pulled out.

I wouldn't have anything. I had gas and air for some contractions, but like I didn't want anything when I was like pushing and that.

I tried the whole caboodle.

I only had it half way through – coz you can't keep it in your mouth.

Said, 'Do you mind if erm...a trainee midwife delivers the baby?'

Mine was the cleaner.

I had – they had to ring the emergency bell thing... dead scary isn't it?

My pulse dropped too low, or something like that. And the erm Carmel's – it was something do with like the pulse, like the

arteries or something, but I can't remember cos I was just like in that much of a blur - I was just like all happened too fast.

At second stage – when you're pushing – erm I just thought it felt like chronic constipation.

You think at first you want to go to the toilet. I yelled for a bed pan. And then she came and I got on this bed pan and she said, 'I think I'd better have a look – no – it's the baby's head.'

It was the cleaner - she said, 'No, sssp! Don't go the toilet, it's a baby – and it's got a lovely head of black hair'. And that was it. Three pains worth and – gone. Done.

When the baby was born my husband was sent outside and... I'd got the paediatrician, the registrar, somebody had given the epidural... there were about four people standing round the bed - I felt like a, like a specimen.

I got cut.

I was torn.

You used to have to wait for a doctor to come and do the stitches, whereas now midwives are actually trained to do that.

So you don't have to lie there and wait for three hours 'til a doctor comes.

You've got your legs in stirrups and some stranger's looking up your foof!

The stitches afterwards. They itch. And they get tighter and tighter - they weren't soluble in the early days.

One of the worst things was the hair growing back.

I was on a liquid diet – because obviously... and when everyone else was having boxes of chocolates I sat there dribbling... you know. And then a double enema before we came out.

I'm hoping they've moved on a bit since then...

ACT TWO

Remembering...

I remember

I can remember, erm...the green curtains round me.

Must have been about 10, 11?

Having my tonsils out.

I've had operations, but one of 'em I don't remember. Coz I haven't got a belly button. I was born with a hole in my stomach.

I think I was 3 for the first one.

I remember crying and crying coz I didn't want t'have my tonsils out.

The room was quite dark. They had one of them white lights shining over me.

I was going for a mastectomy, it really was peculiar because everything was really bright.

Don't look at the light.

And they push you on this trolley and everything's white, as you're waiting.

There's white everywhere. Brilliant, bright.

It's not very nice; you just wait there for ages. The room was all smelly and just like loads of staff standing round you.

The anaesthetist said to me, 'Have you ever had a reaction?' and I said, 'I've never had an anaesthetic. I've never had an operation.' He looked at me as if to say, 'Your age and never had an operation?' But I hadn't. So I lay there and then, you knew the doors were going to open and you knew you were going to go in. Well, the doors never opened for me coz I must have gone out like a light and then the next thing I woke up in exactly the same position, looking at exactly the same lights and thought, 'They haven't done it! They haven't done it!'

Coming round after, after I'd had the operation, you know... blood on the pillow and – ooh it was horrible – just I felt really confined in...

And then says, 'Wake up Helen... Wake up, it's all over' And it's just like being in a nightmare, you know, it's so – I can't explain what it was like – it was just...' I just thought they hadn't done it, being in exactly the same position on the same trolley – I was probably somewhere completely different. But to me it seemed the same place, and I didn't know if I was dead or alive, in heaven or hell.

My adenoids out as well.

I had the same operation when I was 10 and erm... parents could only visit once –

And my dad said, ‘You’ve got t’have em out’ and I always blamed him for – ‘You made me. You made me, Dad, and I didn’t want to.’

My Mum was in the waiting room.

We were in for six days altogether, and they could only visit us once, on the Wednesday for about two hours in the afternoon.

The machine that was attached to me... it was making beeps.

Waiting for a scan...

That little tiny room...

Like a little sort of cubby hole with doors at both ends, where you go in and you lock the door behind you and then you take all your clothes off, put them in the locker, and put the hospital gown on, and then you press a button at the other door for somebody to come and open it.

They said I got to have a scan.

Because I get claustrophobic I was absolutely terrified of going and nobody told me anything about it.

When you take your own clothes off. Put on the hospital gown, and the dressing gown. Immediately you lose who you are. Lose your identity.

The line on the scanner.

You have to breathe...well; I had to breathe in a particular way as well. And the machine's all round you uurrh (panicky shudder) 'Am I breathing properly? Oh I can't go through this again'. It's just quite...quite disorientating.

Feeling incredibly claustrophobic before I even went in.

I'm not, not claustrophobic, but just felt stuck in this space with these green curtains round me, must have been like on wheels then weren't they...

I've never had an operation, but I went to hospital once 'cos I drunk sterilizing fluid. I thought it was milk. My mam had just sterilized the bairn's bottle – and there's milk on the side and like I closed my eyes before I even like took the lid off and

everything. And I was drinking sterilizing fluid. Ermm I went into the front room and looking at my mam and she said that my face was like dead horrified. She said 'What?', and I just burst out crying and the ambulance man came and I had one of them things, clamp things on my finger – erm...went to hospital and put... I was just put in this room with like loads of toys and loads of teddies. I was about 7 or 8. I got a teddy at the end of it. They just left it, they said that erm...it wasn't poison or anything, so I'd like be ok and everything and I asked my mam if I could have one of these little teddys that were all like supposed to be for the babies, but I got one. I got a balloon from a fireman, but I let go of it the same day. And I got ice-cream.

What stuck with me is – when they start you eating again after your operation, they brought boiled eggs chopped up in a cup with some butter and toast. I love it to this day. I love it to this day.

Toast – they say it helps the healing process – the sharpness.

Yes, I can remember this cold toast. Crunchy toast.

I remember cockroaches. In Cheetham's at night. The old Cheethams. Daren't get out of bed at night.

The only other thing I can remember is that ~~inject~~ thing in my hand. It was disgusting... I've got a scar...

But it was a very weird experience of loneliness, more than anything else.

That was the overwhelming emotion – just, the loneliness.

ACT THREE

And the doctor said...

I met my doctor...oh...30 years...31 years ago when I was first pregnant. And er...he'd got a new surgery. He'd moved area, he'd got a new surgery, and I think I was his sixth patient, 'coz he'd got his patient records in a shoe box – about that big. He's from India and his wife's from India and she's a doctor also.

I think she's German.

A kind of Eastern European name.

He's from South Africa.

I think she's Chinese.

Irish – broad Irish.

But he's been more like the old family GPs. He's - He knows me. He knows me. And he's been very kind. Always got time to see you. In the early days he went to see his old – the old people in the area, without an appointment he just went to check on them every week. Of course as the practice grew bigger he couldn't do that and now it's a big practice with umpteen doctors.

I've known so many doctors.

I first met my GP, as he was then, in the early 70s. He was a very big guy, quite portly and I honestly thought he was a member of the England rugby team rather than a general practitioner.

I don't really like male doctors.

I see Carmel's health visitor. She's really really nice. She always listens like and, if I've got concerns, or anything – and yeah, she's really friendly. She's... erm... I should think she's about 30. Yeah, she advises me loads. She like, helped me with potty training, erm and thinks like that – she's really good.

I had to change doctors. I didn't particularly want to 'coz of moving to Catherine Court.

I suppose the doctors I'm at now – I don't know if I can always get a female doctor.

She knows me, even though I don't know even her. She just reads me like a book. I can just sit there and like she'll say something and I'm like, 'How did you know?' Like she's psychic or something.

I don't go to the doctors. Em...I had to take her once, like. She got a cold. But the doctor was really nice. A man. Not sure where he was from, to be honest. He was dressed smartly, in a suit and everything. He was really nice, well mannered.

Say if I had a cold I'd like brush it off, and I wouldn't go to the doctor, but if Billy had a cold, I'd take him.

I like to think I know my son and I know if he's poorly.

I get really nervous about going, I do. I don't know why, I just don't like it.

Well we've got a group of GPs who you ring first thing in the morning. And you might get an appointment and you might

not. They might say you have to ring again tomorrow. So I haven't been for ages, but whenever I go, just go for blood pressure checks and I see a nurse, I don't see a doctor for a long time. I thought about making an appointment because I don't care much they keep dishing these tablets out month after month without ever seeing people, so when I've gone I usually end up saying I'll see anybody – just to actually get in on that day when I want to go.

But the last time, I remember... one of the last times I remember going, he sort of just sat there, looking at the computer. He never looked at me. He was tickling away on his computer all the time and sort of didn't seem to be taking much notice of me at all. He asked me what I thought was wrong and erm...he just sort of sat there smiling. I mean, he came across as being not very bright – but actually, he was – you know, he's a very, very intelligent man, but he did...his manner and all that...well, in fact he's dead now. But erm...he was the head of the practice. Erm...He just seemed to be more interested in the computer. He seemed to be a lot more interested in the computer than in looking at me or...he didn't even ask me to sort of roll my trouser leg up to show him my knee and 'Don't you want...?' didn't seem interested in looking at it. I couldn't see how you could tell what's wrong with somebody's knee without actually looking at it.

I haven't been to a GP for years.

The last one I saw, I had damaged my spine, I knew I had damaged my spine. Erm...and he was a locum at the practice. I can't remember what his name was, but I think he was Eastern European. Erm – probably in his 40s...and I'd gone to ask for an x-ray on the advice of a physiotherapist and he got me to turn round and he thumped each of my vertebrae going down my spine and I was crying all the time because I could barely move erm...and he thumped each of these vertebrae and then he said, erm...he said, 'If there was a real problem you'd have turned round and thumped me.'

In the end, out of desperation, after three months, I went to see a erm...an osteopath and she diagnosed a displaced vertebrae within four of five minutes of starting her examination.

I mean, if I thought there was something wrong, and I thought a GP could help me, I'd go. It's not that I would never. He just – he was kind of the last straw with GPs.

I got more joy from a physio a lot of the time. I broke my leg. Really bad break, spiral fracture in my...tibia. Plaster for 11 months – seven right up to here; and five to here. And I kept saying, 'Why aren't you doing anything? You know, what you

doing? Prince Charles has done his elbow and six months later it wasn't healed so he had an operation...'

So he went away on holiday, said, 'We'll leave you without plaster, see how you go on.' Well, the gap... it was spiral fracture about that big and twisted, and you could still see a gap. So my leg went black and it was twenty four inches round the calf. So I went to the hospital said, 'I need a second opinion.'

He's a consultant. He's a consultant and I'd had... I'd had some reconstruction surgery done... after breast cancer and it hadn't gone right, and he'd done something else, and it didn't didn't turn out right, and erm...I wanted it removing...and er...he wrote to my GP and put it down as scar revision...

I said, it's really not scar revision, and he didn't like it – you could feel his heckles come up. 'You're not happy with my work?' I just wanted this gone...

So when he came back from holiday he rang me. He was awful. He said that I'd opened Pandora's box and I must take the consequences. Right. So my husband...it cost us 8 and a half thousand pounds – I went private.

My care's been at the University Hospital, under about 3 consultants actually. So the one that I probably know the best is one I've known for a year...And he's a consultant and he is absolutely fabulous.

He comes out, you know, calls your name... top of his lungs down the corridor. You go in, he shakes your hand, like this, nearly shakes it off – 'Hya hun, how are you?' You sit down and he's got all the time in the world to listen to you.

This guy was young, and he was gorgeous. And I'm just sitting there...and he was like of Asian extraction; he was tall, he was slim, and he'd got black hair, long – down to about here and he was absolutely gorgeous to look at. And erm...he was dealing with getting me diagnosed with all the tests and er...he was say it as it is, call a spade a spade. I went in 'Hya, sit down' and er...he told me what was what...

He said, 'I can see you are somebody who's going to be worrying a lot.' He says, 'Now let me tell you, this will be a piece of piss.' He said, 'If it's all contained, this tumour' he said, 'We just whip the kidney out, sew you up, and away you go.'

So he said, 'No, I'm not sending you for an x-ray'.

And he said, 'Prince Charles is a wimp.' Right. 'Prince Charles is a wimp.'

'I'll tell you, you're very lucky,' he said – 'The good news is,' he said, 'The bad news is you would have been dead if it was 1950s; the good news is that this will keep you alive for your full life span, so...'

Then he said to me, 'You forget when you had no breast at all'. To say something like that to someone whose had breast cancer – and, breast cancer nurse whose sitting in with me, she never said a dickie bird to him. Never said nothing. But it had really upset me.

I wanted to make a complaint, but I hadn't been strong enough.

And his manner was as brusque as you can even imagine. Erm...and he spoke... er...very harshly really about anything – but - a friend of mine who was with the same practice developed cancer and he was absolutely fantastic with her. This big, brusque, rugby playing character with the ruddy face suddenly became a very gentle, caring, considerate man who looked after her right through the course of treatment. I'm pleased to say, she recovered.

He was say it as it is. He was brilliant. And he was gorgeous to look at. Gorgeous.



Voices of Experience with Maria Whatton

Lesley, Lisa, Sharon, Sue and Tricia of 'Voices of Experience' submitted the following stories and poems. The writing is presented in an unedited form, in order to preserve the authenticity of the women's narratives.

Giving birth should be the happiest time. But now and again it is not so. Scary becoming a mum, for the first time. Life changing another life to look after. Wondering whether it is going to be a boy or girl. And as the months go by excitement takes hold buying nappies, vests, babygro's. Then one night lying in bed my baby moved and I had a sickly feeling. Even after all these years, I can still remember it now. Anyway after that night it wasn't the same. Didn't feel any movement, but was assured that was quite normal. And as I had an anti-natal appointment there was nothing to worry about. That was not right. I had to go for an x ray and it was confirmed my baby was not alive. There was no words to describe how I felt right then. So seeing Mr Baker the gynaecologist it was arranged for me to go to the maternity hospital to be enduced. This took place at night. I went into labour, giving birth and she was not breathing. The midwife wrapped her up and left the room. The words were in my head, but wouldn't come out. I could not say, to ask let me hold her, cradle my baby girl. Part of me was scared to. Wondering what she would of looked like, had she

grown but then I was not asked if I would of liked to see her. My Mum was with me. Holding my hand. She went and saw her granddaughter. And told me that her hair was black. Not long after, I was taken up to the ward. As it was early hours it was quiet. Didn't sleep, to much going around in my head. Morning rounds began. And to my belief I was in a ward where there were women who had given birth to their babies. Talk about cruel, wasn't in it. To go to breakfast and be asked what you'd had a boy or girl was heartbreaking. There joy was my sorrow. I stayed in over night filled in a form to say what cemetery I wanted Victoria to be buried at. And that was that. It was as if it had never happened. When I went for my post natal appointment Mr Baker told me that the cord had caught around her neck, and that there was no reason why I should not get pregnant again. That night she turned inside me was the night she died. After going home, I waited to hear from the hospital to know where Victoria was buried, as you could not arrange it or even go. Not even a chance to say goodbye. That letter never came. There was always a part of me that wanted to know. But never could bring myself to find out. Until a few years ago I plucked up the courage to make enquiries. And though she was not buried where I asked. Victoria was laid to rest in a communal grave, with five other babies. So not alone but nothing there to say any babies are buried at all. And I cannot put anything there myself, because it is a communal grave. Another reminder that she didn't exist all because she

was still-born. So wrong. In the early 80's that was what happened. I will always regret not being able to ask to hold her. Not being able to say these few words. Victoria will never be forgotten. Victoria was my baby girl.

And the Doctor said.

“Come in”, his monotone, unenthusiastic almost bored yet authoritative voice travels through the cheap and poorly varnished wooden door I’ve just feebly with trembling hand reluctantly knocked on. I hesitate for a second, scared and sick with nerves and anxiety and guilt knotting the insides of my stomach, my heart beating faster, the palms of my shaking hands sweating. Hear I go again, to try and tell my story, my experiences, get across all that is inside my head. To ‘tell’ of the constant pounding, of the large TV screen that sits right at the front of my forehead and takes up two thirds of my head with it’s film rolling continually showing me all of my degradation’s and torture, beatings and abuse. To ‘tell’ of the driving thoughts that are becoming stronger and now are a need for me to act upon. Yet if I tell, what will happen? I hope they’ll take me away, take care of me, help me into a zombie state of haziness and complete numbness. What about my little girl, she’ll be better with her aunt, we all know that. So why am I am bothering to come? Why don’t I do what my head is telling me to? Because it’s wrong that’s why, it’s a sin to take your own life. But I’ve sinned before, so many times. What of the damage

and hurt to my beautiful little girl and what's left of my loving family. It's not going to be difficult there's the train station just across the road or apparently painless, razor and bath.

And the Doctor said

"Please sit down" extending his arm outwards and indicating to a blue plastic chair adjacent to the desk he was sitting behind without raising his head from whatever it was he was busy writing down. I sit obediently, shakily, my right leg has a life of its own, quickly tapping repeatedly up and down as my foot can't seem to rest flat on the floor. I am wringing my hands, my head bowed and my eyes looking at the grey and white flecked plastic linoleum floor. It smells musty yet clinically clean, quite sickly really, I start to breathe through my mouth instead of my nose, it might help calm me as well.

And the Doctor said.

"So Mrs. you have seven children and have left you violent husband, well at least you're safe now.

"Well actually doctor, it's Ms and I have one daughter only." In my apologetic voice, I feel like I am an inconvenience, that I should actually say nothing and nod my head in agreement with anything this man of authority says, he is obviously a much better human being than me.

"So what's the problem, you've left him now."

“Er, mmm, I can’t sleep at all doctor and I’m shaky all of the time, I feel scared and can’t relax, I feel sad.”

“Ok, lets try you on Prozac for your depression, it’ll take about two weeks for them to start to have an effect, and I’ll give you beta blockers for your anxiety as well as some sleeping tablets – you shouldn’t need to take the sleeping tablets for too long as there is a risk of becoming dependent on them.”

“Ok Mrs., come back and see me in a couple of weeks and we’ll see how you’re getting on.”

“It’s Ms. Actually doctor.”

I’m dismissed; it’s obvious yet silent as he hands me over a pale green piece of paper _ the beginnings of ‘My Script’

“Thank you Dr.” I get up from the blue plastic chair sort of bowing my gratitude to him for his time as I backwardly exit the room, humbly.

I read ‘My Script’

Fluoxetine 20mg capsules 1 x 3 OD

Propranolol 40mg 1 x 2 OD

Zopiclone 7.5mg one to be taken at night

9 Months on And the Doctor said. “I’m running late, I’ll be at least another half an hour” the CID police officer informs me and my social worker that’s the message from the police surgeon. We’re sitting in a small clean, echoing, clinical examination room within an empty roomed special reporting police centre – for vulnerable ‘victims’ of crime. It’s late

afternoon and I'm stressing over who will collect my daughter from yet another new school and where she will be taken to. I hope social services will take her for tea and meet us back at the Bed and Breakfast place we stayed at last night, even though we are in a room that's obviously over the entertainment room – there was a 60's disco night last night until 2am – we felt like we were sitting right next to the over keen and more than likely over aged DJ and his speakers!

My God, what the hell have I done? Let that monster back into my life because of my pathetic loneliness, weakness and desperate need for attention, for love no matter what form it takes. I'm always grateful – not this time, I am shocked to still be here, I don't deserve it. I don't deserve this interest of others; I am disgusting, dirt itself. Down 'there' is black, fully black and swollen, how can I let anyone look at what I've allowed him to do yet again. They will take my daughter away, they will lock me away, they will despise me, not like me, I can't bear for nobody to like me – most of my childhood and adult life has been spent apologising for the overweight, ugly duckling I know I've been.

Notes From the Oncology Clinic

We sat in the waiting room, Grace and me. Neither of us felt very worried, just a routine follow-up from the last lot of scans.

The waiting room was full of the usual sick-looking people and anxious relatives - easy to tell them apart - the sick ones seemed more at ease, jolly and upbeat even, compared to their despairing next of kin. Husbands, wives, moms, sons, dads, daughters. Sisters.

Grace and me were used to the hospital; the waiting around; people staring pityingly at the unsightly scar across her neck and the newly-diagnosed emerging from a clinical room, shock imprinted on their faces. Everyone in the oncology clinic was a curiosity. The disease made people ask questions and seemed to evoke sympathy and pity from sufferers and carers alike.

We were surprised by the entrance of a couple we knew from when we were kids. Tom and Brenda Brown. They had lived a few doors down from us. I tried to recall the number of their house, picturing each front door between our house and theirs and the neighbours who had lived at each one. Lydia next door at number sixty one; John, a widower, and his son Paul at sixty three. Then there was Gladys; she was a functioning alcoholic - she drank sherry by night and worked in a factory by day. Hers was number sixty five. At sixty seven, there were the Cannings - typically brummie and very decent in every way. The 'posh' lady's house was the next in our row, so she must have lived at number sixty nine. She was an elderly widow when she moved in and didn't really mix much with the other neighbours, although she always said hello if she happened to be out pottering in her front garden whenever I trotted past on my way to call for one of the Wheeler boys down at the end .

Now, did Tom and Brenda's house come next or was I getting mixed up between them and the Roxbury's? Mr and Mrs Roxbury were a lovely old couple; kind, warm and friendly. Tom and Brenda Brown were their opposites - miserable, nosy, gossiping, never a smile or a good word to say about anyone. No, I remembered then, Tom and Brenda did come next, number seventy one. I remembered they had plastic streamers hanging on a roller rail behind their front door; thin strips of brightly coloured polythene: yellow, blue, red, green, white. I thought they were fashionable back then. Funny how tiny details like those could stick in your head for such a long time.

God, she looked awful. Brenda, or Mrs Brown as we always called her, was being delicately guided to a seat in the waiting room by her husband, Tom. They had both got really old looking. Mind you, it must have been a good ten years since I last saw either of them. That would have been when Mom and Dad were still alive. I would see them pulling up the road and getting out of their car, a Ford Mondeo I think it was. Typical nineties car for the typical English working class family. They had bought their council house some years earlier, had three sons, all of them grown up now, just like Grace and me. No doubt they had a few grandchildren as well.

I started to draw comparisons between them and us in my head as I looked inconspicuously at Brenda's translucent facial skin. A fragile milky white skein glued to the skeletal contours of her cheek bones and eye sockets. The disease was clearly in the advanced stages judging by how sick she looked. In a way, I almost felt glad that my parents were dead. The thought of

them getting old and ill, helpless and wretched, like Brenda in that waiting room of despondency, made me feel relieved that they had died prematurely. At least they would not have to suffer the distress of old age. And I no longer had to suffer that morbid anticipation that had plagued me throughout my twenties when I was obsessed with my parents' mortality. After they had died, I didn't need to worry about it anymore. It was then that I learned an important truth: anticipation is worse than actuality.

I muttered something to Grace about how terrible Brenda looked. They hadn't acknowledged us which saved us from an awkward conversation. The last thing we needed was a 'What brings you here?' followed by a superficial exchange of clichés and the pretence of caring for the other when we would not give each other the time of day under any other circumstances. We had not been the closest of neighbours growing up; me and Grace giggled at all the times Tom had tried to have a go at Dad for parking in 'his' spot at the top of our road. Dad wasn't the kind of man you would take on if you had any sense. He had put Tom in his place on more than one occasion over parking etiquette and Grace and me traded knowing looks with each other whilst laughing to ourselves about Dad's reputation in his younger years for being a bit of a head case.

We were the next to be called in by one of the clinic nurses. I say 'we' but it was Grace's name that the nurse had mouthed and that I had just about been able to decipher amidst the routine hustle and bustle of the day's cases moving along the

oncology clinic conveyor belt: each stage bringing its victims a step nearer to their fate - cure or death.

We entered the room. Grace's consultant, Mr Malik, was his usual jovial self, greeting us both warmly and inviting us to take a seat. I sat by the door, opposite the consulting chair which seemed to engulf Grace's tiny body. The last few months of radiotherapy had made eating almost impossible for her; the ulcers that had formed all over the inside of her mouth meant excruciating pain when any attempt at speaking or eating was made. The resulting involuntary starvation had taken its toll on her weight. We had joked a lot about this - the irony of her spending her whole adult life wanting to be 'thin'; following this diet and that regime and never quite achieving her 'target weight'. Now she must have been barely six stones; the bikini figure that had always eluded her was now hers; what a price to have to pay though.

I listened as Mr Malik looked intently at his patient, my sister. I observed as he pronounced judgement on her. The headaches she had been having recently were due to a new tumour in the pharynx. The intensive chemo and radiotherapy had been futile. Slowly processing this information, her eyes pleaded for a miracle from the powerless medic. "Isn't there anything you can do?" she murmured.

"I'm afraid not, no," came the reply. "

Her lips quivering, my sister quickly composed herself. She feebly smiled over at me and we both knew this was the beginning of the end.

Sarah Hassan

MASKS

As I looked in the mirror I didn't recognise the dead-eyed person returning my gaze. Robotically I applied the bright red lipstick and Abba blue sparkly eye shadow that had been left out for me. I looked like a badly made up drag queen, I hated it. A single tear escaped my eye as I put on awkwardly his special outfit that he bought me for such occasions. I reached into the medicine cabinet and my hand clasped the soft feathers of my mask for this session. I adjusted the flamboyant feathers and faux gems. I should be grateful that he still wanted to have sex with me shouldn't I after all I had let myself go since having the children according to him. Who else would want me! He had women throwing themselves at him every day when he was at the pub he told me constantly. I should be willing to do anything to please him he said. He said I was frigid but you don't hurt the person you love do you? I dragged out getting prepared for as long as I dared but then he banged on the floor with his foot he was ready and getting impatient. With a heavy heart I looked in mirror once more and brushed the tear from my cheek perhaps this time it would be over soon. I was grateful I was able to hide behind my mask he would not

destroy me. I slowly open the bathroom door and head to the bedroom my torture chamber.

SHAME

My cloak was as black as my worst nightmare. I struggled as it pressed down to my very soul. It compressed my neck and I was unable to look people in the eyes. I felt that if I looked in their eyes they would be able to see what I had done. I was restricted and constricted by my cloak. Each breath tightened it about me. I shuffled around unable to escape the pressure it put on me. I was only able to look out at the sun as there was no warmth under my cloak. Sleep bought no respite for me as my dreams were the flashbacks of what he made me do. I felt dirty and sickened that he could call that love. There was no way out I must wear my cloak of shame.

And the Doctor said: What did you do....?

I had ended my fourteen year relationship with my partner due to his domestic abuse. It had been a few months since I went to the police to report his actions. Although charged and bailed he was stalking me. I was trying to keep myself and my children safe but he was making it so difficult. He was ringing throughout the night and turning up at the house. I would take the children out for tea most nights just so he would leave us alone. The stress took its toll and I went sick from work. I needed a doctor's note for work so made an appointment to

see the doctor. I explained to him through tears what had happened and the doctor said. "What did you do to make him hit you?" I felt so small sitting in front of him, I was too low to argue he offered a prescription. My ex was waiting outside the surgery for me. A few months later I was attacked again and went to the doctors. I felt so stupid and put off telling him until the end as I was still off sick. I took a deep breath and showed my injury explaining that I was going back to the police and needed it recorded by him. The doctor said he had just closed down my file on the computer so he would do it later and how much longer would I let my partner hit me. I was crushed, I was given a green slip to attend hospital for an x-ray and again I said the injury needed to be on my file in case the police needed it for evidence. My doctor said that the police could not access my file and he said he would do it later.

The case went to court finally and his barrister used the delay of the doctor putting it in my notes against me.

A Nurse helped...

I was alone on a very stormy sea. I was being stalked by my violent ex who seemed hell bent on destroying me. I was on auto-pilot, the kids were all fed clothed and went to school. I was a wreck. The overly happy mummy mask went on when they were around. The "I'm fine mask" on when out of the house. At the house behind closed doors, when the kids were

at school or asleep, was a different matter. I call it a house as it didn't feel like home, you feel safe in a home! The barrage of phone calls and texts were nonstop throughout the day and night. I didn't feel worthy to tell the police and tried to deal with it myself. I went to see the nurse at my doctors I broke down and told her everything she was amazing. She too had been in a very bad relationship and she assured me that it does get better. She suggested I try to steer clear of prescribed drugs and that I try alternatives first. A glimmer of hope planted itself inside me although I didn't believe her at the time.

I asked for help from a domestic violence charity and began attending a programme. My abuser finally was jailed and that gave me the security and space to begin my recovery journey. I have accessed counselling and gone on other courses to help me. I have taken steps to ensure both mine and my children's safety. I spent £1000 to get an injunction against him. Upon release from prison and after the injunction had expired he took me to court over access to the children. Another stressful time as the last place I wanted to be was where I knew he would be. After a very drawn out process it was decided that he was too dangerous to have any contact with them.

I am now using my experiences to help other women and children on their journey from abuse.

Luckily he was sentenced to prison.

My Son

Diagnosis came the day before his second birthday. Before this he had spent most of his time in hospital being treated for bronchitis, sometimes coming out worse than when he went in. “Don’t use antibiotics!” they said as I was discharged. “He will become immune.”

But mother’s instinct shouted at me what to do! I gave him antibiotics. He got better until the next time. At least twice a week at the doctor’s surgery. I demanded to see a paediatrician.

I can remember my son’s name being called and walking over to the desk. I frantically and exasperatedly told her the different symptoms, and everything that had been going on for two years. This needed to end. I needed answers. Dr Hubbard looked at her fingers and didn’t say much. She gave me an X-ray card to get his chest X-rayed. She said to come back.

I knew she knew the answers. Why did he need an X-ray? Has he got cancer, leukaemia I thought?

I walked to the X-ray room with knots in my stomach and tears in my eyes. Did I really want to know what she knew?

Should we run?

I returned anxiously and apprehensively to Dr Hubbard. She told me she thought it was cystic fibrosis. I had never heard of this but knew from her tone it was serious. I mixed it up with cerebral palsy and asked when he would be in a wheel chair. I can't remember much more or getting home.

And the Doctor Said...

And the Doctor said:

'The baby didn't make it.

I'm so sorry. You had a little girl but she didn't make it.'

I could hear me scream.

Echoes down the sombre corridor
of the hospital labour ward.

I was not there, though.

I had become someone else.

Someone different.

An onlooker observing another woman's pain,

For I had been transformed.

A floating butterfly fluttering above

A new mother, rocking her tiny,

Still warm,

Stillborn baby.

And the Doctor said:

'We did the best we could, we tried
To bring her back. For twenty five minutes
We worked on her, but it was no good.
In my youthful ignorance, I thought they
Would put her in the hospital incinerator.
Obliterate her.

Put her with the clinical waste
In a yellow, plastic bag -
Her existence to be erased.

And then the Doctor said:

'Oh no, no dear, she can't go in there.
You have had a baby; procedures must
Be followed.'

So... there would have to be a funeral
A rite of passage from birth
To death
To say goodbye to my unknown child.

Nine months of waiting.
Heavy, empty arms.

Doctors in a panic – straightforward job gone wrong.
Twenty one years later
I still wonder about you.
My beautiful, lost child.

Sarah Hassan

Breasts

Breasts are funny things
When you are young they are pert and your nipples look up
When you are old they droop and view your wrinkly knees.
They are twiddled like tuning in a radio
They are invaded by implants and cancer
They sought out by hungry mouths.
And clamped on that curl your toes
They can crack and bleed during breast feeding
They can be pierced in your youth
And show the world if you're cold or excited
Breasts are funny things

And The Doctor Said: Six-word stories

Look at me not your screen.
Life with good friends gets better.
Look at me and see.
Domestic violence survives on silence.
Wise women, wise words, hear us.

A little help goes a long way.
Sexual abuse, another taboo.
You trust the doctor is right.
Good medicine is made from mistakes.
Kind words can help a soul.
Mother knows best.
Never underestimate a mother's tenacity.
Talking and sharing is the best medicine.
I don't go to the doctors; I can't wait two hours in the waiting
room.
We exist, we heal, we survive.
Helping hands, healing hands, healing souls.





Local History and Healthcare with Dave Reeves

Consultant fails report

Shock and anger were my first reactions after finally seeing my medical notes after delays by the hospital system. I had a deadline and it was only after persistent phone calls that I managed to obtain a time slot.

As I read the letter and form from my employer to the consultant and his resulting report, my anger grew as this had cost me weeks of my life. The rejection of my application for ill-health retirement was caused by this factually inaccurate report and his failure to inform me that I was entitled to see it, comment on it and amend it before it was sent to my employer.

I asked for a photocopy of the relevant parts of my records and began the appeals procedure, which was stressful but after eventually correcting the original consultant's information, seeing another consultant (not NHS) and submitting my own evidence my appeal was successful. I believe my application would have succeeded at the first attempt had the correct procedures been followed.

Alexis Hall

The sun ray clinic

I wake up thinking, 'Oh goody, it's the sun-ray today and I don't have to go to school this morning. I wonder if that nice nurse will be there, the one who talked to me about my puppet when I was too shy to speak last time.'

I decided to take the ballerina and untangled the strings last night before putting her carefully in the box.

My mother and I get off the bus and walk down the narrow lane to the clinic in Burslem. I wonder why I need sun ray treatment but think it's something to do with being thin and pale.

I'm feeling scared as I know the nurse will want me to talk but am excited as well as I know she really wants to see the puppet. We arrive and I am called to sit on a bed to be examined. My tummy is fluttering a lot now but when the nurse comes in I forget about it as she smiles at me.

"Where is your puppet?" she says and I'm so happy she remembered even though I'm too frightened to speak. 'Does she have a name?' I shake my head, dumb with fear but finally manage to whisper in her ear. At last I feel brave enough to speak and inside I am thinking, 'I hope I can come back here

lots of times.'

She puts dark glasses over my eyes and takes me stripped of most of my clothes to the room where the lamp is. I sit on a bench with the other children and we all breathe in the strange smell that only happens in this room.

It's over now and I hear the nurse telling my mother that I won't need to come much longer as the sun ray has done its work and I'm stronger. I look at my mother who is smiling and happy but I feel very sad as I walk away clutching my puppet.

Alexis Hall

Depression is:

Depression is a fun sponge and consummate eater of joy.

Depression is a soul-sucker.

Depression is the guilt of the past, the taker of the present, the hopelessness of the future.

Depression is the depriver of sleep yet the hater of being awake.

Depression is both the prisoner and the jailor.

Depression is the thief of motivation.

Depression is numbness.

Depression is a taker away of the tapping of feet in time to the music.

Depression is the pseudonym for hell.

Alexis Hall

The Magic Lotion

'It's chicken pox,' the doctor said,
As I squirmed and wriggled in my bed
To relieve the skin so sore and red,
The spots were even in my head.

I soon lost the dreadful urge to pick
As calamine quickly did the trick,
Dabbed on gently with hands so skilled,
That flinch of cold. My fingers stilled.

Alexis Hall

Slowly Enter In

Thick brick walls,
Pathways bordered in green,
Heavy glass doors,
Stone steps, hard floors.

Disjointed waiting room,
Different practices, ultimately share,
Metal legs on cold plastic chairs,

A whiff of cleaning fluid trapped in the air.

Magazines awkwardly piled,
Slipping out, back and through
Bulky and warm radiator slots,
Painted dark grey and blue.

Buzz, sizzle, jump, lit up,
But they've gone in first!
That's not fair. It's ok,
"They are not our doctors", Mum would say.

At least for now it's not the dentist,
Same building, but upstairs,
I've never liked that climb,
To fillings, decay and fluoride!

Next! Where to now?
Room 7, 9 or 10 please,
That long dark corridor,
Knock, knock, then slowly enter in.

Ant Bridger

The Glass Mask of Reception

They sit behind there,
Two chairs, two phones, two screens,
Dividing us from them,
My head, my nose, bumped again.

That shield of protection,
A barrier at arm's length,
See through and perspex,
Or is it glass for extra strength?
An invisible wall of silence,
Are they actually listening to me?
I know I'm talking clear to them,
Now others have overheard and seen.

No privacy in explaining,
What exactly is wrong with you today?
I know they're only asking,
But in this game of life, they're scoring.
It's private and confidential really,
Oh the long-lost personal touch,
A prison of reflective matter,
But they just don't know how much.

Ant Bridger

Our Healthy City

A little bit of Longton
A slice of Tunstall too,
Mix in a pinch of Burslem,
Stir well with Stoke right through.
Simmer gently with Fenton,
Don't let Hanley boil dry,
Ensure a warmly baked-well scent,
Our healthy city, Stoke-on-Trent.

Ant Bridger

The Unforgiving Observer

Today's journey was quite unpleasant,
Heaving because of foul odours,
Unkempt bodies rubbing against dirty clothes,
Wishing I could help clean their woes.

Are they just poorly, ill and sick,
Wanting to buy them soap and disinfectant. Quick,
A tube of Germolene or a Savlon tub,
Make them feel better with a wash and scrub.

Do they even realise their own pungency,
Perhaps it's only me who can smell and see,
But the guilty feeling I've applied sublime,

Just because I'm clean and smell divine.

One associates it all with terrible health,
Dirty living, no respect or wealth,
Realising I don't actually know their story,
I'm too quick to judge in my unforgiving glory.

Ant Bridger

The Review

With my monthly visit now due,
I had booked in plenty of time,
Another doctor to explain to at length,
I am very nearly on my tenth.

The usual pattern quickly grew,
As I was telling them what to do,
To try me on some different tablets,
I couldn't get on with those yellow caplets.

And as I walked towards the door,
It was only then the doctor said...
"You are not feeling suicidal are you?"
Me? No, I can't imagine being dead.

Ant Bridger

Obviously

Can you tell me how you are feeling now?

Can you tell me why you feel so foul?

Can you tell me if your stools are heavy or light?

Can you tell me how you sleep at night?

Obviously, I am under the weather,

Obviously, I am not a 100%,

Obviously, I do not eat right,

Obviously, I do not sleep that tight.

Ok, I see, look up from the floor,

Ok, I see, it sounds so raw,

Ok, I see, so let us explore,

Ok, I see, so tell me more.

Obviously, I do not make eye contact much,

Obviously, I feel angry at the world as such,

Obviously, I want to run and hibernate,

Obviously, I curl up and ruminate.

Oh, really, what makes you feel this way?

Oh, really, it sounds like you need to relax and play,

Oh, really, what would make you feel less blue?

Oh, really, I guess I could prescribe some pills to you.

Obviously, I have some mental health issues,

Obviously, I often cry and my only comfort is in a tissue,
Obviously, I have come to you to recover,
Obviously, I thought you would say pills were the answer!

Ant Bridger

A change of heart

John, irreverent
Mischievous, gypsy brown,
Romany nose,
Never lived in a caravan.
Last man on earth
That should be made Supervisor
But they made him.
I don't swear often but
He made me.
Bastard!
"Do you know what he called me?"
He complained to my wife.
"There should be a law!"
Started the collapse at work.
In pain, turned blue
No breath,
Mr Yacoub and Papworth changed his heart.
Knowing a heart transplant patient back then
Was like knowing a man who'd been to the moon.

John?

Leukaemia got him in the end.

Michael Callan

Angry with Barry

Angry with Barry

Best friend

Caught bumble bees together

Kept them in jars

Don't know why

Barry got sick

Kidneys

Barry wouldn't give up drinking tea

Died

No dialysis then

Still angry with Barry.

Michael Callan

"Our Julie's got to have her wisdom teeth out."

Nigel announced

Rosie and I winced

"Is that bad then?"

"The girl in the bed next to mine when I had the tooth transplant didn't half suffer. She was worse after the operation

than she was before.”

“Tooth transplant? You mean they rushed you to the side of a corpse?”

Michael Callan

Alistair Cook

Alistair Cook was a nice man.

Met below Atlas

Outside the Rockefeller Centre

When the twin towers still lived

“Are you guys English?”

“Yes.”

“There’s Alistair Cook.

He introduces plays on TV.

Do you know him?”

Know him?

His American letters were part of our lives.

Sad when he died of bone cancer

Amazed when the mortician

Stole bone from his legs

To sell for grafts.

There’s no cure for stupidity!

Michael Callan

Deadly Dust

Deadly dust

Corn starch powder

US condom lubricant

Carcinogen

Years before

The dots were joined

Cervical cancer rates have fallen

And now Surgeons' gloves

Are powder free too

Michael Callan

Toast

Good health

Here's to us

Cheers

Good health

Bottoms up

Slainte

Gone yellow

Liver?

Good health

Not sure

Thirst

Good health

As ever
Never

Michael Callan

Sleepless

In the sleepless dark before
The working dawn
I replay the day to come
Remembering the future slights
And imagined failures
Before the day's begun
I do not work
For seventy two hours a week
Deskbound, there is no stress
Just mind curling fear
I lift nothing, not even my spirits
But my back aches
In the sleepless dark before
The working dawn.

Michael Callan

No name for it

Oatmeal maker's elbow
Clay end-it is

Leaning on tubes of wet clay
Waiting for makers to use their stock.
Red, wrinkled elbows
Still sore in wet weather
Should have stood straight
Without lazy leaning
Bored.
Later
Seventy two hour weeks of
Constant pressure
Telephoned and emailed through.
Sit at a desk, how hard is that?
Not as if you're working.
Take a drink to ease the stress
Take another
Later
Better stop before I'm ill
Too late
Sudden abstinence sends you loopy...
They're singing about me on the radio.
Turn the radio off
The singing continues
The drinking didn't make me ill
Stopping put me in hospital.
All in the mind
Attention seeking

'Seen any pink elephants lately'
Doctors can be patronising
They're supposed to understand
Later
Dry
Recognised my symptoms in friends
Powerless to help
The blood tests show a recovered liver
Phew
Could have been a goner
Later
There is a name for it.

Michael Callan

1st memory of doctors

Age 3, cracked head open on bricks was rushed to hospital by
my father
Tea towel stitches panic
Other cubicle another child, ring stuck cut it off
Rushing talking busy

Tracy Henham

Ignorance is bliss

Silver slippers,
My new favourite thing,
I took them for a run around the house,
As one does when you are 3 and $\frac{3}{4}$
A warning came but I did not take heed,
And so I came to crack my head,
On the bricks,
That lined the drive.
My first words were
“Don’t worry, it will be ok!” but then
I remember angry parents,
Panicking and shouting,
All the while my head is still spouting,
Blood.
A tea towel to stem the flow,
Was all they could find,
This traumatic memory scorched
In to my mind.
With heated words the taxi came,
Then busy voices all around.
I listened to another child in
The next cubicle all the while,
A toy ring had got stuck,
My head said just cut it off.
The crying and the screaming from beyond,

Refusal had just prolonged,
The procedure.
My busy voices slowly calm,
I'm safe within my father's arms,
Once home mum asks us how it went,
So I tell her,
About the other child's incident.

Tracy Henham

An instrument used

They don't examine you anymore.
What happened to the stethoscope?
Thermometer,
Even the open up and say arrggghhh.....
We now have the one machine that goes beep, or does it?
Soon it will be like Star Trek with the tricorder, one sweep and
it will know,
Science fiction meets science fact.

Soon we won't need to go to the doctors, it will be like
embarrassing bodies and all done on a video link.

The last consultant did not need me there, he said I am just
here to say yes you can have the operation, he did not examine
me and even shouted when I asked a question. It did however

take several goes to convince the hospital staff which hand needed the operation as he had told them the wrong one.

I had a wonderful view of the helipad from the ward, not in long enough to see any helicopters.

First I was in bed then not in bed, they finally decided on a local and a wheel chair, this meant I was awake for the whole thing. I have never seen the theatre, or the recovery room before, at least they didn't put it on the big screen for me to watch. What I did was watch the clock, a very stainless steel clinical looking clock. A whole ten minutes for the procedure. It took longer to sew me up afterwards. They laid me out like a prisoner on the bed at an execution by injection; they managed to get the correct arm because of the big arrow on my arm.

I was whizzed along the corridor back to the ward with a giant pink hand all bandaged up, they fed me toast having starved me because I was down for an operation that became a procedure with barely any drugs at all, not even pain meds.... The best toast ever, and a cuppa and home for lunch time.

How things change, once upon a time we would have been in for days, they would have starved you for 24 hours not just 7 hours and they would have put me under even for such a simple procedure that took only ten minutes. Sometimes things

can change for the better.

Tracy Henham

Smell of the hospital

Antiseptic smell sticks to the back of the throat,
Almost enough to make you want to choke,
Then spend the day trying
To wash it away.
Must be clean
No germ would dream
Of defying such a strong smell.
Any nasty disease, that sticky smell, should kill.
Better than any pill.
If the medicine tastes bad it will do you good....
Only be ill for as long as you could
Stand the taste.
We've got no time for wasters.

Tracy Henham

And the Doctor said.....

"Doctor Doctor...
I think I am a pair of curtains."
"Pull yourself together"

“Doctor Doctor...
I have just had a breakdown”
“Pull yourself together”

“Doctor Doctor...
I have pains in my groin”
“It is the stress...pull yourself together”

“Doctor Doctor...
I can’t breathe”
“Pull yourself together”

“Doctor Doctor...
I still have groin pain, I can’t breathe,
I can’t function because I am distressed,”
“Take these tablets and.....
pull yourself together”
“Doctor Doctor...
I’ve taken an overdose.....”

“Oh, you should have come sooner”

Tracy Henham

Hiding the real problem

The tears welling up,
I'd just had enough,
I could have coped,
Without a fuss,
Just then the boss,
Caught my eye,
He saw my tears,
And asked me why?
"My leg's popped out,
I am in much pain"
Was all I could get
From my panicked brain.
"Call for back up,
Get someone to serve,
Find the first aider,
It's what you deserve,
Accident book,
And papers to sign,
You'll need to be examined,
Your injury defined."
The first aider male,
I forgot had a crush,
The examination,
I wanted to rush,
"I'll need to see,

The offending knee.”
What have I done?
Oh silly me.
I took off my trousers,
A woman stood in,
Covered by a jumper,
Examination to begin.
“I can't see a problem,
He spluttered and gasped”
My reputation
I could no longer grasp,
I limped back to my station,
I couldn't tell why,
All I had wrong was
I just wanted to cry.

Tracy Henham

Another appointment at the hospital

Another appointment at the hospital,
Another day of waiting to be done.
I've done so much waiting in this place,
Why can't I be waiting in the sun?
Who would know that pain can paralyze,
Bringing more than tears to tired eyes?
Take the tablet, hope for sure,

Know there never is a cure,
Find relief for just another day,
Waiting is a price I have to pay,
This is my life it seems to me,
Takes so much energy out of me.
Pain had plagued me now for years,
They finally put a rest to all the tears.
Consult, procedure, then recovery,
Now able to get on with activities.
Tick another off the list,
Catch up with all that I have missed.
Get back now, to doing, what needs to be done.
Living my life like this has never been fun.

Tracy Henham

I could

I could speak out of turn,
Talk to voices in my head.
I could wail and cry all night long,
Or beat the walls of my life.
I could stroke passing strangers' faces and tell them
That my left foot is trying to kill me!
I could buy fifty cats,
And lock myself away from the world.
I could walk out stark naked,

Show the world I need help.
I could just tell you,
And you might brand me crazy.
I could just stay alone,
At least without stigmas and labels.
I could wait,
One day you might just listen.
Or I could write to you,
Send letters, prose, poetry,
Show you that I can think,
Show you that I am reachable,
Show you my problems.
I could try.
You might listen.
You might help.
But I don't believe you will,
And without that
What can I do?

Matthew Newton

A Visit to the Hospital

We waited. A warm enclosing room stifling with a clean white smell of bleach. Leaving through the double doors, the corridor bends off to one side, revealing a field of beds, wired to the walls with tubes and cables. Walking by the others, trying not

to peer across at the patients or to judge their conditions, I had, nonetheless, already ranked them in my head. Who was the most ill, who would be discharged soonest, who might never be.

To walk through a ward, one would expect the smells of illness. It should smell unwell. But rather, here was a pretended odour of good health, falsified, bleached out. Like a liar using too much eye contact, the cleanliness betrayed the dire situation of the room. Rubbing my hands together with the hand gel provided in every corner only increased this situation, adding a gentle ethanol smell to the cacophony.

This is the first clear memory I have of visiting a hospital. Of course I had been in one before, but it was such a long time ago and I was so young, I cannot recall it. Everything surprised me, it was cleaner, emptier and calmer than I had expected. There were not rushing doctors and no projectile vomiting that TV had promised me. It was temperate, mild and dull. And sad. Monotonous drones of machines gradually faded into the background and eventually disappeared altogether. The occasional click of the door being unlocked punctuated the droning quietness, allowing visitors to enter two by two into the ark. The only thing I anticipated was the smell. They say that smell is the sense closest related to memory, and perhaps

this is why the smell lingers particularly in my recollection of previous visits.

Matthew Newton

C

Mike was a local teacher who had lost his beloved wife to the dreaded C. Funny how so many from that generation refer to cancer in hushed tones - barely saying the word. When they talk about cancer they adopt the 'Les Dawson/Roy Barraclough over the back fence' posture and the very word tails off into nothing as their mouth exaggerates the shape of the nearly spoken word...Ca...r

Ken Newton

Typical

Rubbish lad! You young'uns
You should 'ave worked in t'mine son
Now that was a real job

What - you're a social worker?
Bloody overpaid bloody nurse
When we got sick we got proper ill
Emphysema, Pneumoconiosis...and all before breakfast!
That's a real man's illness that is

You cough up real blood.
What's that Doc?
He's dead?
Bloody typical
He let me bloody rant on
And all the while 'e's lying there dead!
Better take these grapes then
No bloody use to 'im.

Ken Newton

Here is the News

By 2015 the government will have reduced the deficit by half.
Are we there yet Dad?

Nelson Mandela is improving day by day.
Are we there yet Dad?

In ten years from now smoking-related illness will have been
eliminated.
Are we there yet Dad?

By the turn of the decade we will all be taking holidays to the
moon.
Are we there yet Dad?

Peace will be restored in the Middle East when Iraq is freed from tyranny.

Are we there yet Dad?

We are nearly home now so we can go thro' your homework together.

Oh bugger!

Ken Newton

First Night on Ward 90

7 PM, MONDAY, END OF MAY, 1987

“Where are we going?”

My question is innocent. It is calmly answered:

“You’ll be safe there.”

As we pull up to low buildings next to, what was formerly, a workhouse, I gasp in recognition:

“This is where Mum went.”

She maintains her reassuring manner:

“There is someone here your Mum would want you to meet. Wait here. I won’t be long.”

They are with me.

We sit in silence...

...I look around the room, reading the spines of the books on the shelves.

"That's a strange book to have here", I say...

They follow my glance to the paperback on the shelf, *The Joy of Sex*, and then exchange worried glances. I resume my examination of the room. Its dowdy with just a few comfortable chairs and a desk piled high with papers. I feel quite comfortable, almost at home....

...I say suddenly, "Two of your boys are okay, but the other one, I'm not so sure."

"What about him?" She probes, worry rising in her throat.

I stop and think for a short while, then say, "No, he'll be alright."

The silence resumes again...

"This must be where Mum met my father", I think.

I remember the story she had told us after one of her visits to hospital. How she had woken in the middle of the night to see a set of white teeth smiling at her. She had laughed when she told us about it and we had laughed in relief.

"Perhaps I'll meet him tonight", I think.

“Fancy him being here after all this time!” I blurt out.

My thoughts continue. If this is a waiting room, what are we waiting for?

My thoughts, unchecked, take flights of fancy.

The door opens and a young woman enters the room in a night dress. We look at each other for an instant and then I shout out her name. She recognises me and replies in similar fashion.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” I say. We exchange a few words and then she leaves. The silence settles in again...

After what seems an enormous time, the door opens and the one who brought me to this place comes back. She gently urges me to come with her to see the doctor and invites my foster sister to join us. We go in together.

“At last, I’ll meet him,” I think.

We enter a long, narrow room with a desk at one end. A white-coated man is sitting at the desk, his back to us. The man turns round slowly, looking tired, disinterested and pale faced.

“But, you’re not my father!”

I can barely contain my disappointment. He is introduced. I immediately think how well his name matches his frozen stare.

“Take a seat.” he says.

I look around. The formal chairs are lined up facing each other like sentries on parade. My teacherly instinct is to rearrange them into a circle so that a more welcoming, in-depth talk can be held. I lack my usual inhibitions which would prevent me from interfering with another’s arrangements. I take over the ordering and siting of the chairs at the other end of the room from the desk and invite my companions to sit down. The doctor joins us, looking displeased. As the interview begins I am overtaken by enormous tiredness. His questions are convoluted and I make a conscious decision not to disentangle his interrogations, but say that I don’t understand. Using her skill as a primary school teacher to explain clearly and ask simply, interpreting each question in simple language, my foster sister guides me through the interview. I am grateful to her and respond appropriately.

The interview at an end, I am shown into a little room with a single bed, a wardrobe and a barred window. I am urged to get

ready for bed, being assured of a prompt return in a short while. On her return, myself in bed, we discuss the merits of trying to fall asleep on one's back and agree that falling asleep on one's front is the best approach. I am told that I can contact her any time I wish. She takes her leave. Tired as I am, I cannot fall asleep.

Looking around the room I consider the meagre furnishings. Then I observe the barred sash window more closely. I decide I cannot stay and attempt to depart the room through the narrow gap. It isn't wide enough and I give up the idea of leaving by that route. I choose, attired as I am, in night dress and no dressing gown, to leave by the usual exit. On my way out I am challenged by a hospital worker of slight build. I tell him I cannot stay. He attempts to restrain me and for a moment there is a tussle which he is clearly losing. Reason kicks in and I stop resisting. I am returned to the room. Staff come in and remove the wheeled wardrobe which contains all my possessions including my daywear. I realise that I am hungry. I take my lead from the conduct of my former pupil and pad down the corridor to the 'waiting room'. My intention is to explain my need. The uniformed woman is understanding and apologises for the lack of butter as she prepares a slice of bread and jam for me. The food does nothing for my thirst which a little later becomes apparent. I don't remember if I was given a drink. I do remember enquiring about 'Build up' which I had

never seen before. It was deemed unsuitable for me. Much later in the night, still unsleeping, I return to the 'waiting room' and, as has become my custom, enter unannounced. This time, another woman in a dark blue uniform greets me with exasperation. She clearly takes exception to my entering the room and to my persistent entreaties for help. She suggests that all I need is my medication and attempts to administer a liquid down my throat. I go limp in her arms. I apologise for being violent and return, un-medicated, to my room. I read the Gideon Bible, the one item left in the room, searching, section by section, according to the headings which offer solace in my current plight. I wish I knew the prayers of the Church and resort to praying in the only way I have known since being a child...

...It is morning and the Sister, a middle-aged Irish woman, enters the room. She reminds me of the Deputy Head at my old school. I tell her of my school record and how I came to be here. She listens then goes away...

...A voice wakens me. It is the Sister who wants me to talk to her. I protest that I have just told her everything. She proffers some medication, chlorpromazine, which I obediently take. Thus begins my long endurance of Mental Health Services...

Gay Hoban

And the Doctor Said....

Kilns

Burns

Burning

Lead painting

Gilding with gold leaf

Yellow pallor from Radway Green

Intestinal poisoning due to infected water.

The doctor said I had a chemical imbalance in my brain. I was to take the tablets to correct the imbalance. I argued that it would surely be necessary to establish the chemical levels in my brain before putting in any new chemicals.

I lie, unsleeping.

There is no such thing as sleep.

Thoughts come to and fro.

Pneumoconiosis

The doctor said, "Take the tablets and you'll be alright."

I took the tablets, but I wasn't alright.

I took the tablets, but I couldn't sleep at night.

"Doctor, doctor, what's wrong with me?" I asked.

"Come along Gay,

It's only natural that you should feel this way.

Take the tablets and you'll be alright.
Take the tablets, one every night."

Gay Hoban

Wise after the event

My first conscious experience of hospitals was at the grand old age of twenty-something. I needed two wisdom teeth removing due to the way they were growing, sideways instead of upwards. The teeth needed to be removed in hospital under general anaesthetic. The surgeon, during his preliminary talk, seemed anxious to remove all four teeth. I asked whether only removing the two offending teeth, both on the right side of my mouth, would leave my face lop-sided. He assured me it wouldn't, so I said I only wanted those two teeth removing. He seemed more than disappointed by my answer.

Before I was given the anaesthetic, I was told I must keep my mouth free from infection. On asking how, I was told that gargling with warm salt water would be sufficient.

I awoke to my friend asking how I felt. I used the tip regarding the salt water and remained free of any mouth infection until 2010 when the water I was imbibing proved most unacceptable.

My fourth experience of hospital, as an in-patient, was when I was subjected to 'imprisonment' in the Harplands Hospital, Ward 3. I arrived about 3pm and went through the various procedures related to admission. As 5pm approached, I was informed by a staff nurse that I could have tea with the in-patients. This was different from the two other admissions to mental health wards whence I had gone to bed hungry.

The admission procedures ran late into the evening. Eventually, a Health Care Assistant, who had taken great care in explaining the difference between her role and the role of an NHS staff nurse, took me to a room with a single bed, where I was to sleep. The stench of urine was over-powering, but I chose not to say anything. I tried to settle down for the night, but the smell kept me awake for most of it. In the morning, I resolved to mention the fact and I was moved to another room.

I have visited a number of care homes and places for older people. The overwhelming smell is an odour of urine. That along with the ubiquitous hand rails and wide open spaces in big rooms with chairs round the edges is what I remark mostly.

Gay Hoban

Cuckoo's Nest

Not flying over, but landing right in it.

My clothes are brought to me. I dress and join the others on the ward. We have breakfast at tables laid out down the centre of the ward with curtained beds to front and rear.

A few introductions are made, including Don, a wheel-chair bound man who seems to be afflicted by something akin to Tourette's Disease. I am told he has had a stroke and that I must not take offense at his language, which he cannot help.

I am interviewed by a doctor in order, I suppose, to establish what had brought me to this.

He asks about my educational achievements (which are inaccurately recorded), my sexual experiences (which are misleadingly transcribed) and my religious inclinations (which are accusingly surmised).¹ I return to the ward to explore my surroundings.

At some point the call goes out that we must come to the Meeting. A co-patient groans and says she doesn't want to go.

We are herded into a circle, on chairs, close to the bathing facilities, all the while the woman becoming more agitated and staff telling her that she must sit still and be quiet.

She persists in saying she wants to leave, to go to the toilet, to

¹ I accessed my health records sometime after 2000 but, having found these inaccuracies on the first page, chose to read no further.

go back to bed, anywhere but here...

She is made to stay in the Meeting.

“What is this?” I wonder.

I suddenly have a desperate urge to go myself to the loo. I stand up, explain my predicament, state that I will return and then rush off to the nearby cubicle. The Meeting is continuing when I return to resume my place. Apparently it is an opportunity for patients to explore their feelings, facilitated by the staff. I say very little in this first meeting, but am reminded of the Jack Nicholson film: ‘One flew over the cuckoo’s nest.’

In further meetings quite a lot of sharing is done, particularly by a suicidal teacher with management responsibilities and an alcoholic businessman.

The day-to-day business of the ward is one of numbing tedium redeemed by short visiting hours.

After two weeks, with no further signs of un-wellness on my part, it is indicated that I might be discharged. My raised hopes are, however, dashed when a nurse informs me that I will not be going home. This news upsets me and I shed some tears. Suddenly another Meeting is announced. It has become my habit to go the toilet immediately, whenever a meeting is announced so that I do not have to leave part way through. When I return I find the whole of the lounge/TV area laid out in a circle, with a large number of ward staff of differing roles,

including a consultant, sitting in key places around the room. The air is one of quiet hostility. No-one speaks. After an enduring silence, the consultant interrogates:

“Come on, why isn’t anyone saying anything?”

Still, no-one speaks. Then I decide to speak my mind:

“Would you share your life with complete strangers?”

The consultant looks thunderous. The meeting is brought swiftly to an end. Later that day I offer an apology for my rudeness to a non-uniformed member of staff.

Within a matter of days I am discharged from the ward but, I am told, as was Moses when he went up the mountain, to take the tablets.

Gay Hoban





Life Story Writing with Chrissie Hall

Thanks to a Compassionate Medical Team

Breakfast in bed, porridge followed by a cup of tea, was just a normal morning for me - Sunday 30 September 2001. It was a bright sunny morning, so feeling warmer than usual I opened my pyjama jacket buttons. Upon my wife's returned from the bathroom, I looked down at my naked belly button to find it was full of tea.

Commenting that I did not remember spilling tea, I must have blacked out. My wife Margaret phoned our doctor and was transferred to an NHS operator. Margaret spoke to the operator then passed the phone to me.

After explaining my experience the operator said "Phone 999 and ask for an ambulance."

"I don't want to go to hospital!" I told her.

The lady firmly repeated "Phone 999 and ask for an ambulance."

Within five minutes two young ladies dressed in green suits walked into my bedroom. They wanted to carry me down stairs in a wheel chair unit. "You will not negotiate the bend in the

stairs.” With that I was away down the stairs before they could stop me. I later realised how stupid I had been disregarding their advice. Luckily the stairs were managed and I sat in the chair to be wheeled to the ambulance. After setting me up with monitoring pads all over my chest I settled down for a ride to the hospital. “Your wife will follow in the car.”

From my semi-sitting position I was aware of the ambulance turning into the Cardiac Unit. Apparently at this point I had a cardiac arrest; I knew no more. Margaret had arrived to be met by a doctor and sister who asked whether she wanted to phone anyone to be with her. In the middle of their conversation the alarm bells rang and the medics shot out to the ward where I was busy having a second arrest. Poor Margaret sat alone not realising the seriousness of the situation.

My next recollection was someone hitting me on the chest with a spade. I was said to have sat up and demanded from the doctor alongside me.

“Did you just hit me on the chest?” With his affirmative reply I told him it hurt.

“Yes Mister Blair but at least you are speaking to me now. You’ve had a couple of arrests and I need your agreement to have an injection which is not without risk.”

“What happens if I don’t have the jab?”

“You’ll probably die with the next attack.”

“What are you waiting for? Please get on with it.”

Surrounding my bed was a group of worried looking medical staff. Holding my left hand was Margaret smiling, but also looking shocked. Gradually the main group of medics moved to other duties, one nurse Laura remained. Apparently Laura had been detailed to stay, alternately warming my hands or rubbing my feet. By this time it must have been about 10.30 am. Laura engaged Margaret and I in conversation for at least two, maybe three hours. Declining the Sister’s suggestion Laura should go for her lunch; instead this dedicated nurse stayed on chatting, checking the screens and rubbing.

Finally at about two thirty, Laura was replaced by a senior nurse who virtually ordered her to have a break. Within half an hour Laura was back confessing she had enjoyed a sandwich, cup of tea and a cigarette.

During the next few hours the target was my stabilisation. It was then suggested Margaret should also get something to eat. Laura said she would be monitoring me until she went off duty, by which time Margaret could be back. Margaret drove home

where our caring neighbours called in; they had seen the ambulance in the morning. I was reassured by Laura that I appeared to have overcome the initial problem, but still needed close monitoring for while.

Laura continued to engage me in conversation taking my mind off worrying about myself, Margaret and Amanda's reaction on hearing of my problem.

Margaret phoned Amanda who booked the first free seat from Geneva to Liverpool. We normally collected Amanda from Manchester Airport, but this time she caught the train, phoned home and Margaret collected her from Stoke Station. By late afternoon the two ladies of my life were by my bedside, Amanda delivering a big weepy hug.

Shortly after Amanda's arrival the two Paramedic ladies who had brought me in arrived with another patient and asked whether Mr Blair had pulled through. Both ladies came over to join the family bedside group to wish me well. The Paramedic's prompt action had saved my life; I was pleased to have the opportunity to belatedly thank them. Having gone through the morning's procedures with the cardiac team, I realised the danger I had placed myself in walking down stairs at home. For my stupidity I apologised to the two young Paramedic ladies for ignoring their instructions to be taken downstairs in

the wheel chair. My action placed these dedicated ladies under strain whilst they were doing their best to help.

My first night in the ward started with an evening meal. The meal was served by the busy staff. These young ladies remained outwardly cheerful when not all their cases resulted in patient's survival. The "Consultant's morning ward round" was the next process; accompanied by a retinue of doctors and nurses.

Standing at the bottom of my bed Doctor James Nolan introduced himself as the cardiology consultant who asked how I felt. Considering what had happened to me over the last few hours, I simply felt damned lucky to have such a dedicated team looking after me. During the medical team's discussion the sister informed the consultant I had planned to attend my daughter's wedding on 19 October.

When Doctor Nolan learned the wedding was in Switzerland, he ruled there was no way I could travel by road, rail or air. Dr Nolan regretted that I would miss the pleasure of giving my daughter away. He added, "I am sure she would prefer to have her father alive." The result was expected by the bedside group; regardless the news caused a few damp eyes including my own.

My good progress warranted me being moved to a recovery ward a few days later. Laura heralded the news; saying she was to hand me over to the new ward. Jokingly Laura announced to the recovery ward staff that I was a “very special patient” needing plenty of loving care and attention. The new ward was full of lucky chaps like me who had survived some form of cardiac arrest. The move appeared to be the first step towards recovery and return home.

Monday 22 October I was back in the Cardiology Department for progress assessment. During a tough tread mill session the increasing pace and incline making my heart pound; it prompted me to ask whether they were trying to kill me? The Doctor in charge confirmed I passed with flying colours; this was to assure me of my capabilities after the problems. A programme of lectures on the recovery process was followed by two sessions a week of an hours exercise.

This whole process of dedicated service took me well into the New Year with check ups to confirm the recovery continued.

My life must be one of many held tenderly in the hands of these wonderful people. Without the team work, dedication and compassion displayed by the NHS teams; each with individual expertise, patients like myself would not be alive today.

My story is but one of praise and gratitude for our NHS medical teams. Why do the media appear dedicated to highlighting medical failures without some attempt to balance their high level of success?

Munroe

Bubbles

I'm forever blowing bubbles – but they're not always in my cola. You know that feeling? You're sitting outside the pub 'cos kids aren't allowed. Dad gives you a can of the stuff – and a straw! So you blow – until reprimanded.

Years later, and it's time for the bubbly! The operation was successful; I'm not "NIL BY MOUTH" any more - time to celebrate.

"Champagne?" He asks.

"Bubbly," I nod. "But it won't be allowed in here".

"They won't know," he tells me, and, for the first time since my diagnosis, I see one of his wonderful mischievous blue-eyed smiles, I feel it shine on me and it lights me up as he leaves at the end of visiting time.

I smile as I imagine him hefting the bottle in today, heavy, smuggled inside his jacket, getting cramp in his arm, pretending there's nothing there. I'm wondering how we're going to stifle

the pop of the cork, and stop it cascading all over the place, both of us giggling and catching it in thin white plastic hospital beakers, sipping tingling delicious fruity mouthfuls.

He's here and I'm excited, feeling like a naughty kid, looking forward to my illicit secret treat.

He reaches into his pocket and now I see it.

"WHAT'S THAT?"

He thinks it's funny. He's laughing, and between his finger and thumb, he holds a tiny green plastic miniature champagne bottle.

"You said 'bubbly'" He tells me.

"I said 'champagne,'" and I wonder if my stitches will survive the effort of me up-ending the water jug over his head.

Undeterred, he pulls the top from the tiny vessel and blows. Through a tiny loop in the lid the bubbles fly towards me. Showers of beautiful translucent rainbows of light and colour, strings of them drifting gently over my bed, one settling on my head, some on my sheet, and another on my pillow, shimmering for a brief second before they burst into nothing. Another stream of them drift slowly down to the floor, and in a second or two they are gone, and all that is left are a few tiny damp tell-tale circles on the tiles.

And now I'm laughing too. Laughing at me, laughing at him, laughing with relief, laughing like I did when Dad told me off for blowing down my straw and into my Cola. Laughing makes the stitches pull, but I don't stop, because there were days and nights when all I did was cry and I'm making up for all the times I couldn't - and my negative reaction to his joke has gone 'pop' and evaporated along with the bubbles.

"I can go home tomorrow" I say.

He comes over to the bed, leans down and kisses me and says. "We'll stop on the way home for some champagne".

Kate Skelten

For Everything There Is a Season

1971

A hot July night. The air trembles with the threat of thunder.

In the early hours of the morning there are no other cars on the road. We drive to the hospital, every light green. The journey is as smooth as silk.

I stand at the window of the maternity ward, watching lightening dance across the sky. Day dawns and you are still not born. It is not until nine o'clock that night that you finally make your entry into the world. Ready to establish your place in it

with the confidence you will always show, if not feel.

2002

December. They say you should be home for Christmas. After the emergency admission I come back from the same hospital, where you were born, thirty-one years ago, and fall into an exhausted sleep. A sleep broken by the insistent ringing of the phone.

As your mother I am your next of kin. I rode with you in the ambulance. I stayed with you until your partner and the father of your unborn child arrived. None of us expected this midnight summons.

I call your father. Your stepfather drives me to the hospital. On the ward we are offered cups of tea by a nurse who tells us to try not to worry. But if there is no need to worry then there is no need for tea that all comforting, all solacing drink dispensed at every moment of crisis.

It is then that I know when the doctor asks you your name and you give your usual feisty reply, but the syllables slur into each other. I grow more certain as you fight the oxygen mask, demand to be allowed home. Know deep in my being that there is no going back from this when they sedate and speed you to the specialist liver unit in Leeds.

On Christmas Eve the sun is shining. The air is crisp and bright. All over the world people celebrate the birth of a child. We return to a cold and empty house.

The tree is decorated. The food is ready. The family gathers. We have all been with you through the past few hours. We cannot go our separate ways now. The meal is cooked, the champagne opened and today and every Christmas Eve to come we drink a toast to you and your baby.

Misha

Ouch!

Ouch! That hurt!
He nearly ripped my nice new shirt
How much longer must I lie
Looking upward to the sky?
Just because, one dark night,
I had to be rescued from my plight
Broken bones, I had to admit,
Were in my wrist where I hit
The pavement.

So now the wrist is straight
But one more thing I hate

An operation looms ahead
Here I lie in my bed
Waiting, waiting, waiting
Oh how horrible was that straightening
Thinking, thinking, thinking
Oh I must be sinking
In my bed.

Now the day is here
Please relinquish me from fear
A day waiting in a room
Until to the theatre I must zoom
“I do the cut” this man said
So to the anaesthetist I was led
Through the double doors I went
To meet the surgeon who was sent
To do an excellent job.

Jean

Ouch 2

Ouch – that really did hurt. The gas and air was by my side but I could not seem to respond to it. The doctor was straightening

my arm, which had been broken in two places. Ouch – there he went again. I was nearly off the bed – such was the hurt.

“Not long now” he said as I lurched off the bed.

My wrist had a bad break. He pulled it into shape and then plastered it. It would still need an operation; such was the extent of the break. So in three days I was back for the operation.

My husband and I waited in a hospital room all day. I had nothing to eat or drink. Still my turn came in the evening. I was taken down to the operating theatre to be greeted by a man who said he did the cut. Feeling rather frazzled, I let the anaesthetist do his work and was swept up through the double doors.

Jean

Sugar

My body doesn't work, not properly, it's damaged.

And I'm fighting to change what I eat.

Fighting an enemy that will not share its rules of engagement.

Curbing...no! Stopping all sweet treats

Swallowing the tablets.

So many. Hating them.

Diabetes. I wish it could be plucked out
Disregarded.
Distanced.
My mind rejects and resents.
My body Decrees - Dietary control, but I can devour books.
I read Drugs and diet, diet and drugs, seeking the right balance.
But still the sugar levels rise and fall
I'm fighting to control the Diabetes Beast.
Despondent when I fail.
Glucose levels that rise overnight. Why is that?
Invasive dreams and memories of chocolate and cake
Permeate my train of thought. I sigh.
I eat no supper yet still it rises, too much tea? I wonder.
Too little medication? I fear.
Levels that fall but not with exercise.
Levels that shift like sand in the wind
And in the wind, advice blows about like confetti,
Scattered by well-meaning others
Wearied I retreat, cowed by the barrage.
I sob for reprieve.
I pray it will end.
I peer at life, vision blurred, through a film of water
Filling my eyes, then cascading down my cheeks.
And I am thirsty, so thirsty, but water will not slake my thirst
Nor coffee, nor juice - just persistent thirst.
Odd bodily sensations. Lips tingling - on fire

Frequent trips to the powder room.
No concern over weight loss just compliments.
I am tired, so tired
Legs tremble, wobble and give way - weak.
I am tired, so tired
Doctors, blood tests, high glucose levels
Off the scale. Alarming.
Bemused, bewildered. Why me? Why now?
I am broken, imperfect, let down.
I retreat, pills in hand to face my life-sentence.

Then...A new phase, a different regime, free prescriptions.
Disbelieving I look at small white capsules.
I swallow and follow....a path back to the light.
Enjoyment, smiles, feelings, life.
I wake, and take notice of the day - birds singing, trees budding,
Trees that in the distance look dead and lifeless,
Close up are bursting with life.
I see rays of sunshine, silver streaks of jets written across the
sky.
I experience daily joys and sorrows
I see innocence, and mourn its loss,
I value life, and grieve its loss.
New life grows in bulging extended round tummies

Pregnant mums joyfully waiting
Arms warm with love. Trusting.
A sense of wonder prevails.
I can be your 'honey' again
You can call me 'Sugar'.

Teresa

Celebration of life

Depression, dead under the weather, understated and unable
to express emotion

Unable to feel or speak out from my darkness.

No chinks of light are permitted, no rays of sun penetrate

No electric light to flick on and off I am heavy hearted,
surrounded by greyness.

Small white capsules, wonders of modern medicine

Containing a path back to the light. Enjoyment, smiles, feelings,
life.

To wake and take notice of the day - birds singing trees
budding,

Trees that in the distance look dead and lifeless,

Close up are bursting with life.

I see shades of grey, rays of light

I experience daily joys and sorrows

See the silver streaks of jets written across the sky.

A sense of wonder prevails.

I see innocence and mourn its loss, value life and grieve its loss,
New life grows in bulging extended round tummies
Pregnant mums joyfully waiting
Arms warm with love. Trusting.

Teresa

Vulnerability

I thought I would be okay. After all I have visited sick relatives and friends in the hospital, been able to be calm but firm, understanding but reassuring. It was fine. I was an adult, a mature person, or so I thought. Yet when my husband left me after my admittance to the ward behind A and E I felt as though he had taken my maturity home with my clothes. Bereft I searched for my self possession, found nothing but a sick and shaking mass of humanity. Stripped of identity I was here, isolated, no one to speak up for me. Me alone among strangers...I wanted to cry. But didn't.

With no other meaningful activity with which to occupy myself I turned my thoughts inwards. I drifted through my memories of hospital visits and mused.

As a child I had been into hospital five or six times for skin grafting operations. Memories flooded back as I reminisced.

Running from my bed to hide in the bathroom to separate myself from the dreaded pre med injection. The nurse was none too pleased at the time wasted and the extra pressure it placed on her already busy schedule. We never saw eye to eye after that episode. I was always the naughty girl. She was the nurse who wanted to hurt me.

The Spanish lady in the corner of my ward, about ten beds up from me (long wards in those days with twenty or more patients per ward). When we had gone down to theatre for our respective operations her teddy had come back with a bandage on its leg. One he sported proudly. Mine came back in a blood soaked bandage and not so much as a plaster. Yes I did cry. It hurt.

There was a teacher in the hospital in those days. A spritely, retired white haired lady who strolled purposefully around the wards each day collecting up the handful of children inhabiting a sterile adult world. We would sit round the bed of the sickest child to work on maths and English exercises. A brilliant idea which cut through the emptiness of boredom, the long days of waiting for the visiting hour permitted each evening. Her school room was positioned at the top of a wide circular staircase. Sun

would stream through the window at the top and dust mites lazily drifted through the air. Atmosphere was a mixture of polish, the library and just a hint of something indefinable. I loved that room and the craft cupboard, bulging with raffia and exciting projects.

My last stay in that particular hospital was not so good. The teacher never came to my bed. I was too poorly and had to lie on my back, head hanging over the back of the pillow to keep the skin grafted onto my neck taut. I was bored, but pleased not to be the girl in the next bed as she had to lie on her stomach. Her bed had been turned so she faced the centre of the ward. We could not communicate at all. Those were long days. Very long days.

I smiled at my next memory. An adult admission for a lascaropy. The consultant visited me on the ward, quietly spoken, pleasant, and reassuring. I trusted him. Next day on the theatre trolley he spoke to me again, in a whisper. Well we were on the outskirts of the theatre; I figured people wouldn't want to be disturbed...so I whispered back. Our whispered conversation created smiles and hushed tones from the other staff round the trolley. Eventually he asked me to speak up - as he could barely make out what I was saying. My next sentence

seemed to reverberate round the room - so loud. If I had to speak up why was he whispering? "Ah, My dear," he replied, "I have lost my voice." The next injection was very welcome - it effectively removed me from an embarrassing situation. I went under feeling very foolish.

Back to my present situation. I felt very vulnerable, so many hospital visits to see Mum and Dad - some pleasant and positive memories among them, I thought about Dad and wondered how he was getting on. Was Mum coping with his demented meanderings...My mind was locked onto my experiences of the previous few nights. Talking Dad Back from the Gobi desert because the last bus had gone and he had no money left for a taxi. The elephants that had followed him back into his bedroom from safari in Africa. The great divorce. When he had been adamant that Mum had been out walking with him the previous day and she was equally adamant that he had not been out. She was right. At four O'clock in the morning he was demanding a solicitor, mum was crying in the other room. Only careful negation resolved that situation.

My own family had left me there for the night. As my imagination over took the reality of my situation. Alone, I could just disappear. I felt I was without a voice, no one to talk to.

Plenty of people around to talk about me - as though I wasn't there, didn't have an opinion or interest in what was going to happen, or in what course of treatment was to be prescribed... For me to feel like this was quite a revelation, me who could be advocate for others, fight their corner, ask their questions was now so overwhelmed and vulnerable.

As my stay progressed I observed the elderly people on my wards. The lady opposite with a daughter who never left her side, fed her, offered her fluids, liaised with the staff about the care preferences and needs her mother had. The manner in which she clung to her daughter, eyes following her every move. The way she fell apart when her daughter left her at night. Her confusion, her inability to communicate her needs effectively and the long periods of time she was left alone in her confusion without reassurance.

The lady in the next bed to me who was rather hard of hearing, and needed everything the nursing staff said to her repeating, explanations which were pleasantly accepted then needed to be gone over again and again in more simple language. The proverbial words of one syllable. She was confused, not in a manner which caused her to call out; rather she didn't understand what was wrong with her and what was going to be done to her. So alone.

It was only a few weeks later I was back at the hospital again. This time with Dad. He was admitted for the third time in as many weeks. The first and second times Dad was treated, but for what I am still not sure. Lengthy discussions with the doctors were held to ascertain what the problems were. He was given a clean bill of health.

Regular visits to the ward were a trial and distressing. Adjacent patients complained that Dad had kept them awake at night, calling out. He was thirsty and not able to get a drink. Hungry but would not eat. He clung to me when I visited. He spoke of his fear of being left alone of being a nuisance, of not knowing where he was. He called out for reassurance. I passed this on to the staff, who in turn promised to pass it on. It reached only the ears of the next shift before being lost in the pages of notes that were never again to see the light of day.

I read the discharge letter that accompanied Dad home, a discharge which occurred at 9.30 p.m. into a house where the pre-arranged carers would not call again until 8 a.m. the next morning. Delivered home by ambulance men who seemed reluctant to put Dad to bed, but were persuaded to help me settle Dad in bed for the night. The discharge letter read 'has a serious infection'.Really!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Even to my untrained eye this was no surprise. I could see Dad was seriously ill. His

confusion always increased when he was ill. Why I wondered did the doctor lie.

A few days later I called out the GP. Dad was having difficulty breathing. The doctor came, called in the nurses from Stoke, to assess the feasibility of nursing Dad at home. DNR forms were discussed, put into place, an ambulance was sent for.

I followed the ambulance in my car and reached the A and E department just in time to hear the ambulance men saying, 'Family none, lives alone with his wife who cannot cope'. What! I'd been coping for the last 7 years - managing a difficult situation caused by the hospitals in the first place. I undid the verbal damage, asked for it to be struck off the admittance record.

This visit admitted us to a different ward. Frail and elderly. The staff there were wonderful. The consultant had a wealth of humanity and understanding when asked should I call my siblings to Stoke - he replied he didn't have a crystal ball. He was amazed at how much I knew about Dad. His likes and dislikes his fears and what reassured. He told me it was refreshing to find so much information about his patients. Many lived alone.

I tried again, the same question, worded differently. "If you were me and this was your Dad what would you do?"

"My dear," his warm brown eyes held mine as he replied, "I'd be on the phone to them."

Tearfully I left the ward and made three phone calls. Lincoln, Canterbury, and Stokenchurch.

By morning the whole family was gathered. (Mum, Four children, three grandchildren and a well developed bump who would never meet his Grandfather and namesake.) To share Dad's last hours. A time which the nursing staff supported, offering our family a quiet dignity and private space. He was ninety years old and is sorely missed.

Teresa

Stereotypical Uniform Day

The call came early in the day. John, a temporary Security Guard, was 'acting strange'. I wasn't surprised. There was a rumour that he had been drummed out of the Salvation Army band for playing 'The Stripper' on his cornet during a break in rehearsals.

I left the warmth of my office and crossed the lorry park to the

scruffy hut which guarded the factory gateway. One of our drivers was bent over John who was slumped in the only chair. 'You'd better sort 'im out.'

'I'll be okay.' John grimaced.

'You don't look okay.' I told him.

He was sweating. His pulse raced and he was alternately flushed and ashen. I suspected he couldn't stand unaided.

'Chest pains?' I asked, and his right hand flapped feebly in the direction of his chest.

'Angina, it'll be reet in a minute.'

'I'm not risking it' I told him. 'Hospital for you, either 999 or A & E'.

'OK you nip me down A & E, get me checked over, be in and out in a jiffy.'

Curses! The boss was at a meeting in Northampton so the company car was out. The only vehicle available was the LGV fitter's truck. I thought about the cab, festering leftovers of the fitter's chip and burger lunches, brown sauce and oil stains.

I asked George, the fitter to bring his truck to the hut and while he was at it to brush the fag ash off the seat.

I used the 'phone to summon a warehouseman to deputise in security. A popular job with the added bonus of an ever boiling kettle and the opportunity to smoke endlessly during quiet periods, of which there were many in the middle of the day. George and I half carried John into the cab and we set off on the three mile trip to A & E. John insisted on wearing his uniform cap all the way there.

On arrival at the hospital car park we slotted the van into the last available space and headed off to find the 'pay and display' machine.

By the time we got back John had clawed his way out and was leaning against the van resplendent in his security uniform, peaked cap and yellow hi-vis fluorescent vest which glowed against the red panels of the van. He was breathing hard and surrounded by a clutch of people all trying to get his attention.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'We're trying to find out where the next nearest car park is an' this ignorant so and so won't tell us.' Grumbled a florid over-

stuffed armchair of a man at the head of the pack.

I explained that despite his uniform, John was a patient, not a car park attendant.

The final shot in the exchange was, 'E still should know where the nearest car park is!'

Eventually, John, safely prised from the angry mob was seen by a triage nurse after a respectably short wait.

'He doesn't look well.' She announced.

'That's precisely why we're here.'

Later in a cubical a tall, young, Irishman in tired surgical greens arrived.

'We don't get many of your lot in here at this time of day. Take your shirt off.' He instructed John.

'Our lot?'

'Garda. Polis.'

'No' I explained. 'Security guard at Humberstone's factory down the road.'

John was stripped, ECG'd, medicated and discharged with instructions to go home and rest and contact his GP in the morning. Back in the truck John said he didn't have a GP and borrowed my phone to ring his sister. She agreed he could stay with her for a while. I took him home, a hostel near the canal, and waited while he got his things together, then dropped him off at bus station, where he borrowed £20 off me. I never saw him, my money or the company uniform again, but every time I hear 'The Stripper' or a Salvation Army band, I think of John, my twenty quid and that stereotypical uniform day.

Michael Callan

Karen's Story

I had such a bad, chaotic upbringing. I was basically a lonely lost girl, who didn't have very good parents.

Because of my lifestyle I have suffered physical and emotional neglect and all I wanted was to be loved, cared for and wanted but it was the total opposite. Always crying and hardly spoke and if I did I was either laughed at bullied or pushed away.

But August 1993, I felt my life had changed. I was with a partner who loved me and felt warm and in love and I found out I was expecting my first child. I was delighted, but over the

9 months I was getting emotional and angry and the worst thing happened, I drove my partner away two weeks before I gave birth. I was upset and more to the point scared as I didn't know how to look after a baby, and actually got that scared I went to social services and told them I am scared and don't know what to do and wanted to put my child up for adoption, but the social worker was lovely and her exact words were "Karen, it's natural to feel that way, we all feel like that and you're still young," as I was 17 years old. But I still walked out feeling scared, but I got that scared about a week before social services put me in a Mother & Baby unit, which when I moved in there was other young mothers and I was able to hold some of the babies and now again change their nappies which some times smelt bad, but I was loving it.

April the 15th 1994 my time had come and oh my God I was petrified and the pain I just can't explain. I really could not cope with it, for which the nurse suggested I had an epidural. I was crying badly with the pain and thought I was dying.

The doctor came in and said to me put a pillow on my lap and rest my stomach on it, while he gives me a small needle at the bottom of my spine, for which I agreed. Bad mistake. I turned around with the pain and saw the needle - well it surely didn't look small.

The doctor looked up and said, “Will you sit still and sit up straight if you want this injection.” Really did not know how to take him apart from being very rude, but I was in too much pain to say anything back, and finally had it done and shortly after ten past nine in the evening I gave birth to a healthy little girl weighing 7lb8oz and the pain seemed to have disappeared. I was only in hospital just over 24 hours then I went home to be a proud mum and start of a family. For a few days I just would not let her go, always cuddling her, kissing her, checking if she is still breathing – everything a typical first-time mum would do. I even would not let her sleep in her own bed, always in with me, as I was scared I would miss her cry if she wanted a feed. Staff in the place I was living got to find out and started to help me gradually get my baby in to her own bed, and agreed with staff to come in my room once a night to check how it was going.

But from the time I started putting my daughter in her bed, I had problems sleeping. My bedroom was next to the staff room and I used to go and have a little chat with staff and have a cuppa. I also had to take a baby monitor beside me, so I could hear her breath, etc. After maybe about 20 minutes I went back to bed.

One night, my baby seemed a bit unsettled. She had a bottle and bath, but when coming to time to bed she always woke as

soon as I put her down in her cot. The only time she settled was in my arms, so I thought I would just let her sleep in with me, for which she settled and we both fell fast asleep.

I woke up early in the morning and was very scared. I woke up to find that my baby had gone but found out that the staff came in and put her in bed and although she was fast asleep in bed, safe and well I was angry that some one could come in that easy and take my baby when I was asleep.

As from that day I could not sleep well, the slightest noise I would wake up and once awake it took me ages to go back to sleep.

I also started having regular visits from the local health visitor. I had told her I am not sleeping good and getting very tearful quite often, but all I used to get was that it's normal for a new mother.

As time went on I was still restless at night and my baby was too.

At one time about three months after my baby was born I fell quite ill. Well to be fair I thought I had a bad stage of constipation as I could not go to the toilet and if I did it hurt really bad as if I was in labour again. So I went with a member

of staff to the doctor's as I found it hard to walk and felt faint. As it was an emergency appointment I was more or less straight in. Once I got into the doctor's, and explained the pain, I thought they would give me lactulose to help me go toilet, but the doctor said, "Please can you lie on the bed, just need to feel your tummy please?" So I did what the doctor asked then I saw his face as he gently placed his hands on my tummy. My heart felt like it was beating faster than it should and asked him "Is there something wrong?" Doctor replied "You need to get someone to look after your daughter". I answered "Why, what's wrong" and started crying.

Doctor replied "You have a very bad swollen appendix and if you don't go to hospital now then you will be in great trouble – I have to ring an ambulance right now."

Staff said "Don't worry we will have the baby and will arrange for someone to be at the hospital for you."

Well, I felt I had no other choice, although I didn't want my daughter to go and felt I was leaving her forever, the same as my mum did, but although she was in a safe place I had to go and within seconds an ambulance was here to take me to hospital. It all happened very fast. I can't remember arriving at the hospital due to the pain I was in, all I could remember is a doctor dressed all in white saying he has to give me this

medicine by needle and count backward from 10, which I think I got to 8.

The next thing I woke up shouting for my daughter but a nurse calmed me down, reminding me I am in hospital and that I had just had my appendix out and said to me when I have woken up properly, my daughter is waiting for me in my room.

So after a while I got pushed to my room, in my bed still and couldn't wait to hold my darling child. When I had held her all I did was cry. I was only in hospital a couple of hours, and then I was discharged.

Once home all I wanted to do is cry every day all day, which was making me struggle with every day activities mainly with the baby.

When my baby cried I found myself shouting at her, shouting "shut up". One time the staff came in. I was in a state and was worried she'd overheard me shout. All I could say is, "I am sorry, don't know why I'm doing it, and all I used to get is "you've been through a lot, you'll be ok."

But one night I was really down and the baby kept crying. Staff said she may be teething so I gave her some bonjela and calpol. It seemed to work for a bit so while she was asleep, I had a bath

and thought it will be nice when she wakes up to give her a bath.

She woke up about 8.30pm. I gave her a feed and couldn't wait to give her a bath as I love the fresh smell of babies when bathed in bubble bath and talc. She started to cry and I got tearful for her. I checked the water - everything was ok, and placed her in the water. As she went in the water I got all tearful and my emotions got the better of me and although my daughter had done nothing wrong I had a feeling I wanted to put her under water. Luckily, I got her out, and dried her, and I really could not stop crying. I felt I needed help and told staff what I felt like doing, so they agreed to have my baby for an hour or so and I had her back but staff just checked on us through the night.

In the morning I went to speak to my health visitor and she said I am suffering with post natal depression, and from then on she supported me so much and arranged to see me every day and spend an hour or so with me, and staff supported me in the evening. After a few weeks I started to feel a lot happier in myself and found it easier to look after my daughter and became a loving mother and daughter again. If it wasn't for my health visitor I really don't know what I would have done.

Now my daughter is 19 years old and I can proudly say that I am going to be a grandmother very shortly and really can't wait. Our family is growing and happy and strong and all together.

Rita's Story

The door opened and a dark figure emerged with a dog on the lead, my husband had returned from his evening walk with our Springer Spaniel named 'Barney'.

A few weeks before my husband had been diagnosed with Meniere's disease, which affects balance and at that moment he lurched across the kitchen floor and I didn't know what was happening, and what to do. He was a big man and I struggled to get him to his feet. I said, "Are you ok?" He mumbled, "Help me to bed," which I did, and after seeing to things and thinking it was his balance, I did no more and we both settled off in bed.

The next morning I awoke and so did he, but his speech was all gobbled gooch. I immediately sensed something was seriously wrong and phoned for the doctor, who came, and confirmed what I thought, that it was not 'menieres', but he had suffered a stroke, which I hadn't recognised, because I was put off the scent, and he could have died in the meantime, it made me shudder. The doctors had been wrong, both doctor and consultant had agreed a wrong diagnosis. I had received a letter prior to this event from the consultant, that it was most unlikely he would have a stroke as he had given him all the

medication to avert this. So it was a big shock, as I had not sent for paramedics the night before, I felt guilty but it was not my fault entirely. Yet it was.

As soon as the doctor saw his condition, he started him on blood thinners, which he had not been given prior to this. Then the fun started a procession of physios, speech therapists, nurses in the following months. John had chosen not to go into hospital, so I was in charge. My neighbour who was a GP himself, said that he would be very demanding, which he was, but the doctor himself said he didn't blame him not wanting to go into hospital, so that says it all, but eventually on his third stroke which occurred within the next three months the GP insisted he go into hospital.

He worked very hard to get well, doing his exercises very religiously, maybe too often per day and his brain would not take it all in I guessed. He was left with no use in his right arm and hand, his eyes and speech were also affected, as it was the right side of his body but the left side of his brain.

At the same time my mother and father were in a local nursing home. I had to do all the business and keeping them supplied with as much affection I could spare. I was sometimes at my wit's end. It seemed that was all that was left, because after my husband's retirement, hospitals, etc, was all our life consisted of.

The only relief at the end of the tunnel was my involvement with my local art group, and this relieves some of my anxiety. I

have kept this up and I advise anyone in a similar situation to find themselves a distraction to deal with the situation they find themselves in.

It is seven years now since the stroke and eleven years since my mother and father went in the nursing home. Mother died at 89 after only one year but Dad remained there for another 10 years and was 98 when he died. That was another terrible end. Until then I had never seen a dead person. I was in the room when they came to take my mother after she died for a post mortem, because she had not seen a doctor two weeks prior to her death. They zipped her up in a black bag and Dad and myself had to give a summary of her life to whoever it was that came to her, I think it must have been the police, but at such times as this one doesn't know rightly what is happening. She had gone down to breakfast, had it as usual, sat in a chair afterwards to start her day, slumped forward and died. Eventually she was examined and found to have had a thrombosis. I remember squeezing dad's hand and he had said to me remove mother's wedding ring.

When I look back at the service of the NHS, there have been many incidents when wrong diagnoses have affected me and family members. For instance, I had campylobacter, a serious bug which affects the stomach and almost every other part of the body. It took over six months to get a correct diagnosis. I had antibiotics, camera down my throat, barium meal, admission to hospital A & E, when I got undressed, put to bed, with a tag on my wrist and given a urinary test, then a couple of hours later, sent back home. Two student doctors were on the

ward I was in and they agreed it was 'irritable bowel syndrome', gave me an injection in my back side, and that was it. After umpteen call outs, for the doctor at home, and medicines prescribed, I was no better. By then I had lost 2 stones in weight, because I couldn't eat and not until they decided to send a sample of my faeces to the lab to be tested did the nightmare end. My doctor phoned me up, sent some other antibiotics to my house...within a couple of weeks I was feeling better and gaining strength. As one talks to other people, one realises that this is happening all the time. After this I had to see a specialist who couldn't believe what I was diagnosed for, and what it really was, were not spotted, but they say that doctors can bury their mistakes and she did try to make excuses by saying that the two symptoms were much alike.

After saying less favourable things about the NHS, we all have to admit we couldn't do without doctors and nurses, and compared with other countries it is mostly all free unless we opt to go private, when all is not as good as it should be. A woman I know had one hip replacement on the NHS which turned out to be better than the one done privately. The trouble with the NHS at the moment is lack of communication, missing files, inexperienced doctors and nurses etc and too many patients to treat, and at one time nursing was vocational but now it is just another job, highly paid, not as it used to be. When I was 18 I went to be a nurse and even got measured for my uniform. I had been to grammar school, left at 16 and my father got me a job on the firm where he worked in the accounts office, which I did not care for, so I thought that

nursing would be an adventure. All you had to have was 2 'O' levels, which I had, and another friend was supposed to go with me, but she never turned up, so I did get a bit further by having an interview with the matron, a physical examination etc. She did impress on me that nursing was a vocation, poorly paid, having to do all jobs including emptying bed pans, scrubbing floors etc and highly committed.

At that time you used to get married, have a family, give up work and were left on the shelf if you were over a certain age. I had a boyfriend who was doing his national service in Germany at the time and he came home on leave at the moment I was doing all of this, in fact his parents told him I was at a certain hospital working, and he went there enquiring all around the wards to find me. In fact I realised that it was not for me, but today it is different. The whole set up of working mums is the norm, but I wonder about this. Times have changed for the good or worse?

Now I find myself, a carer for my husband, I don't think that I could have a career as a nurse and I think that is why things are going wrong in certain hospitals in this country, too little care where it is needed, lack of compassion which is needed in such jobs.

Another Experience

The nursing home was another experience for me visiting for 12 years when my mother and father were there. The people who owned them were in it for the money. Workers were

poorly paid, thus inexperienced. A lot were from abroad. They had a different culture than ours.

Towards the end of my father's life he was wandering in the night at the care home, he fell out of bed and hurt himself several times and in the end they put a mattress on the floor where he lay at night. An inspector from Social Services came in and said this was unacceptable and when he started spitting blood I enquired what the reason was. The doctor visited the home each week and evidently blood tests had been taken from him, but when I was very concerned and asked nursing staff at the home they kept saying that he had a throat infection. Then one day I had a phone call from the doctor to ask me to come up to the surgery, which I did. She then very cagily explained that his blood tests had been lost and had just come to light. She more or less stated that dad had cancer but not for sure as there were no records for such an elderly man, which I couldn't understand as I was so upset, but she said all they would do was to keep him comfortable. He was in and out of the hospital after this. The home used to ring me up to go up to take him, as they had no staff to accompany residents, only if they had no children to take them, and on one Saturday afternoon, when I had been to see him in the morning, but had to get home for my husband they rang to come straight away as they had called in the paramedics to my father. We waited in a cubicle in the A & E and we were given a number for when it was our turn. A nurse came and trying to take blood spilled it all over the floor and someone came to clean it up before the woman doctor appeared. She took one look at him, realised he

was wearing pads for incontinence, looked at me and said to him, “Are you in any pain?”

He answered ‘No’, he never admitted, he was a hard man. Then she turned to me and said ‘You can take him back and let nature take its course or we can put him on a drip and antibiotics and leave him here.’

I was taken aback and said do what you can to help him, as I thought he would be better in hospital, lesser of two evils than taking him back to the home for night staff who only look in on the residents every so often.

Another time my mother was in a side ward after being admitted and we waited and slept in the hospital in the waiting room until the next morning until she was seen by a doctor and put on a ward. I could write a book, but thankfully have got some things off my chest with this exercise. Thank you.

Rita





Sharing the Stories

In the winter of 2013/14, an exhibition of the And the Doctor Said... toured a number of community venues, with an opening event at the Burslem School of Art in December 2013. From Spring 2014, the exhibition will be permanently displayed in the Research and Enterprise Hub at the Faculty of Arts and Creative Technologies, Staffordshire University.

The exhibition, which was professionally designed and displayed, reflects our commitment to participatory approaches. Very often, people contribute to a research project and then hear nothing about the outcomes of the project, which are shared mainly by the academic community.

We wanted to take the results of the project back to community members and to actively involve them in sharing the work, by inviting people to read their stories, and by showing the films that had been made in the workshops. The creative writers were also invited to the event, which also served as a real celebration of the achievements of everyone who had been involved in the project. The various groups welcomed the opportunity to meet people from the different workshops and to see the diverse range of writing that had been done. Similarly, the creative writers were able to see how others had approached their workshops and to read the work that was produced.

The exhibition remained at Burslem School of Art for a month, allowing many people at the time to visit on their own to reflect more quietly on the writing. It then went on to be displayed in the Henrion Gallery at Staffordshire University for a further month. As well as the project exhibition, we wanted to develop alternative ways of sharing the stories that enable us to reach a really wide audience, including health professionals. This book contains all of the writing produced as part of this project, and it will be widely distributed. In addition, all of the writing and the films from the workshops can be accessed via the project website: www.andthedoctorsaid.org

Feedback

We wanted to know what people thought about the workshops that they had taken part in, and about the project exhibition. We asked them to fill in feedback questionnaires. Rather than asking people for their feedback straight after the workshops, we waited until the launch of the project exhibition in December 2013, as we wanted to include a longer-term perspective on the impact of the project on people's lives.

What had encouraged people to get involved?

People had various reasons for coming along to the workshops, ranging from the desire to develop their writing, to interest in the subject matter, through to a very strong desire to 'make a difference' through taking part in the research.

"I wanted to learn how to write a story." (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

"I like writing, felt the need to explore, express my experiences. There was an offer of support (professional) for my writing which I felt would be of benefit." (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

"I am a frustrated/secret/lazy creative writer with a number of NHS experiences." (Participant at Dave Reeves workshops)

“Thought the link between local history and health would be interesting.” (Participant at Dave Reeves workshops)

“To get our voices and experiences out in the public to try and help change how professionals and the public see us.”
(Participant at Maria Whatton workshops)

Finally, one of the participants at Deborah McAndrew’s workshops was encouraged by the fact that “it was a workshop specifically for women, and I was part of a small group of women whom I knew to be supportive of each other.”

How much prior experience did people have of creative writing?

Whilst some participants regularly engaged in creative writing, in some cases as part of writing groups (and in one case as a creative writing facilitator), others reported having had no prior experience, or that the project had renewed or further developed their previous interests and experiences.

“I had done some poetry before but not for a long time and never with any formative support.” (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

"I am experienced in writing, but not in creative writing (not done any of that since I was at school in the 1950s!)"
(Participant at Deborah McAndrew workshops)

What had people enjoyed or found valuable about the workshops?

There was a wide range of responses to this question, with some people focusing on the social aspects of the workshops, and others on the benefits and understanding that they felt they had experienced from the writing and the sharing of stories.

"The contact with other people who shared their stories gave me the freedom to share mine." (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

"The freedom – the confidence that came with others reading my work and listening positively/constructively. I found the experience affirming...it was good fun with a serious outcome. Gave me some purpose and ideas on how to begin writing. I wrote prose – a first since school days." (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

"It enlightened me to see how a few lines from individuals can make interesting reading." (Participant at Deborah McAndrew workshop)

“Made me concentrate and use ideas I had not previously used. Listening to other people’s experiences.” (Participant at Dave Reeves workshops)

“Enjoyed meeting different people and listening to their stories”. (Participant at Deborah McAndrew workshops)

“I loved listening to the different anecdotes of other women; I found Debbie McAndrew to be enthusiastic, inclusive, patient and affirming of every experience”. (Participant at Deborah McAndrew workshops)

“A sense of community. Valued for my input.” (Participant at Dave Reeves workshops)

“Getting to know people and getting the confidence in reading my story out.” (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

“Spending time with like minded people, being encouraged by Maria and writing my experiences down. I found the experience quite healing (mentally).” (Participant at Maria Whatton workshops)

“Being with V.O.E. in the workshop is good because with them and Maria you find that any challenge is possible.” (Participant at Maria Whatton workshops)

Was it important to people that the workshops were part of a research project?

Using creative writing workshops as a research method is innovative in the context of academic research, and is quite a different approach to the more traditional interview or questionnaire. We wanted to know how participants had felt about this: whether it made any difference to them that the workshops were part of a research project. For those who responded that it *had* been important to them, this tended to be linked to the sense of purpose and the desire to ‘make a difference’; this was expressed particularly strongly by members of Voices of Experience.

“It was good – felt the writing had a purpose – but it also showed me that while audience is important, it does not have to be the sole reason for writing. Research – I needed to “research”, explore my own feelings.” (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

“It was an interesting aspect but at the time not particularly important, unless it affects (for the better) the healthcare people in north Staffordshire receive in the future. Think now it is a worthwhile project.” (Participant at Dave Reeves workshops)

“Very important as it is hard for survivors of domestic violence to speak out safely. Hopefully our stories may shape how professionals in the Health Service deal with future survivors.”

(Participant at Maria Whatton workshops)

One of the participants in the Deborah McAndrew workshops had been involved in community research projects in the past, and for her, the process of the research was particularly interesting:

“Yes, as someone who has carried out community research projects in the past, I was fascinated by the process. As with all research, it was almost impossible to see initially how the anecdotes would ‘come together’ in a unified-but-different overall ‘story’.”

Was there anything that would have improved the experience of taking part in the project?

For several participants, the limited time in the workshops left them feeling that they would have liked more time for feedback, and indeed more time in general to engage in the project. The inclusion of film-making as part of the workshops further added to the pressures on time.

Had the workshops made any difference to people's lives/activities?

For some participants, the experience of sharing their stories for the first time had, in itself made a difference:

"It made a difference to me in the way that I had not written down my story ever. Although it was painful to do it was good to share the experience with trusted friends from V.O.E. and to have their support." (Participant at Maria Whatton workshops)

"It allowed me to write about a traumatic event in a way I hadn't done before." (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

For another participant (of Deborah McAndrew's workshops), the project had further strengthened existing friendships within the group of women who had attended the workshops together:

"The friends that went to the workshops together have stayed friends, and probably drawn a little closer now that we have an element of 'shared history'".

Several other project participants were looking to further engage in creative writing following the workshops.

“I hope there will be further opportunities to do creative writing either through this or with Voices of Experience”. (Participant at Maria Whatton workshops)

“Not yet, but I do want to do a life story writing course and put together a family history for the family.” (Participant at Chrissie Hall workshops)

Responses to the Exhibition Launch Event

There was a very positive response to the exhibition: people valued the opportunity to meet people again and to see what others had written, and ‘how the different parts of the project came together’. Showing the project films at the launch event was also a good way of demonstrating the links between the workshops:

“I found the film helpful in understanding the other groups who took part. I had no idea that my small contribution could lead to something so magnificent!” (Participant at Maria Whatton workshops)

“I found the posters with the anecdotes from the other workshops poignant, sad, and revealing. I really appreciated the opportunity to read of experiences that must have been hard to share with others. The fact that people had done so is a

testament to the 'safe spaces' offered – and maintained – by the leaders of the groups.

It was also a joy to see the breadth and depth of the data that emerged from the 'whole', and how a coherent picture came together.

The readings by different participants were also very good: hearing someone tell their OWN story in amongst the more anonymous pieces of writing.

The little exhibition of pottery decorated by one workshop group was very thought-provoking, poignant and beautifully displayed.” (Participant at Deborah McAndrew workshops)

There were also positive comments about the quality of the design of the exhibition. A Visitor Book was available throughout the exhibition, for people to record their comments. These included:

“Wonderful, beautiful, personal”

“Fantastic display”

“Fabulous, wonderful personal gems – a real treat!”

“Thought provoking”

“Fantastic stories! All different yet echoing similar experiences”

“Such touching, personal & emotional stories. Amazing to hear others experiences & realise that none of us are alone in how we sometimes feel.”

“Powerful writing – these stories are important, valuable and moving in many ways. Thanks – what a privilege to be involved.”

“Powerful, emotive and mind blowing writing. Amazing that our stories are valued and can influence.”

Finally, the creative practitioners were asked for their responses to the project and their involvement in it. These were some of the comments that were made:

"We drew the shape of a woman on a large white sheet. I invited the women (participants) to doodle and draw their health experiences onto that body. Together we created a life map of stories that I think women universally would be able to relate to. They are the stories seldom told, as they are often too personal and painful to express.

A recurring theme was that of being treated with insensitivity when you are feeling at your most fragile. I think this was vividly expressed in the words the women painted onto pottery. I want to thank the women for their courage and creativity. Without doubt the creative process allowed them to express the details of their experiences and share them candidly with the protection and safety that this innovative project secured."
(Maria Whatton: Writer and Storyteller).

“I am very pleased with the results achieved by the participants, with the look of the exhibition and documentation, and to have been asked to participate in the project” (Dave Reeves).

Dave also felt that the exhibition launch event had been a valuable part of the project:

“The looks on the faces of the participants who attended said it all: they were pleased with the result. They were allowed to have as much involvement as they felt comfortable with, while the whole event appeared planned and comfortable...I have been glad to see the workshop participants involved in the launch event and hope that they will also be involved with the launch of any publication. In my experience that sense of closure which comes from knowing that there is a tangible outcome from a project is very important to people who have participated. I think I'd go so far as to say that there was a wellbeing benefit.”

Deborah McAndrew felt that her workshops had been an opportunity to develop a particular approach within her work:

“From the point of view of being a creative writing practitioner, my workshops were very successful and provided me with a working model for creating audio documentary with different groups in the future.”

She also offered some valuable reflection on the challenges and the value of partnerships to develop creative approaches to academic research:

“For the creative practitioners the challenge is to stick closely to the brief and retain the discipline of addressing this at all times, rather than pursuing our own artistic instincts. The reward for success in this approach for the creative practitioner is in furnishing a more engaging environment for people contributing to research that has the potential to be rather dry. For academics there is the potential for a much deeper level of contribution from participants, who are more engaged through the use of imaginative techniques.”

Chrissie Hall described why she had been keen to be involved in the And the Doctor Said...project:

“It was unique and innovative. I was excited by the prospect of being part of a team supporting individuals to respond creatively to their experience of health care. I was particularly excited by the prospect of those responses being accessed by medics to expand their understanding of the patients’ experiences, and being used to inform the processes of training, change, improvements, and refinements regarding the delivery of and access to health care within our National Health Service. ‘And the Doctor Said...’ project offered me the opportunity to

work collaboratively with academics and creative's bringing together the main strands of my work, i.e. experience of working within health settings, my work as BBC 1 medical drama scriptwriter, and my work as a tutor/life story writing facilitator in a variety of community settings.” (Chrissie Hall)

She went on to reflect on the project having completed her workshops and after seeing the project exhibition:

“I found the project exciting, enjoyable, well organised and personally rewarding. I was pleased to have this opportunity to expand my practice to enable individuals to respond specifically in writing to their health care issues. I am aware (Research from United States etc.) that writing about such events the writer can experience personal and therapeutic benefits to individuals, their families and wider communities. I found the comments from participants on the short film confirmed this – and I enjoyed hearing and seeing them very much. – Thank you! The project was also a rare opportunity for a ‘creative’ to have a strategic yet creative input on health care. Since being involved with a single issue national lobbying organisation I am aware that ‘evidence’ from academics is a vital step in bringing about changes and improvements in government policies etc. I very much appreciated having the opportunity to work strategically, especially as I am aware that as an older woman, from a

working class background 'voices' like mine have not featured strategically in the past and are still a rarity."

We were pleased to receive a number of suggestions for the future development of the work, both from participants and from the creative leads.

What Next?

This project was effectively a pilot project to test out the approach of using creative writing as a research method for exploring people's experiences of healthcare. The success of the project and the positive feedback that has been received suggests that there is plenty of scope to further develop this approach. In particular, we are planning ways of further involving health professionals in future projects, and of using what has been contributed so far to generate discussion and to bring about change.

Our vision for the future also includes securing funding for a peripatetic writer in residence (to be attached to a partner organisation in north Staffordshire) with a view to establishing a permanent published and performance legacy for the project such as a play, short stories, or other creative output. The creative writer will be based in the community, accessible and responsive to local residents. In this way, we hope that the positive impact of this project will be experienced by many more people and for years to come.