

5. Holywell ward, St. Albans City Hospital.

As I got into the ambulance leaving Hemel Hempstead I asked if I could sit up and look out the windows. This request was granted and was at long last able to see where I had been the last 5 weeks. Having been to Hemel Hempstead on several occasions I knew the city rather well but did not have a clue where the hospital was. I had been trying to work it out by questioning both Corien and Jean but still I could not figure it out. All I knew that there was an Asda nearby but I kept imagining that it was another Asda, the one enroute to St. Albans never remembering that that it could be the one in the town centre which I had been to on a few occasions.

In the ambulance Warren commented on how green the trees and fields were and we briefly talked about his flight to the UK and how he was not allowed to bring his guitar which I had asked him to bring as I always enjoyed his gentle strumming, without having to pay an exorbitant additional charge. It is ridiculous that he was expected to pay extra for it whilst there are a lot of passengers carrying a lot more body weight. I feel that it is time that that airlines took this into account.

The journey to St. Albans was soon over. On arrival I was wheeled out on a stretcher, through the automatic doors of the Runcie wing, a sound that would become very familiar during the forthcoming weeks.

As we entered the ward I looked at the smiling nurses and said, "I will walk out of this place soon" All I got were looks of disbelief.

I recognized the therapists who had previously assessed me for acceptance in Hemel Hempstead a few weeks earlier and smiled at her.

I was welcomed by several nurses and taken to my bed in the ward where I was transferred into a wheelchair and then pushed into the day room. The day room was a spacious room with a television in one corner, a fish tank that needed cleaning, a jigsaw puzzle in front of a huge window, several comfortable chairs and a dining table with 6 chairs. I was so glad to be here at last and it seemed like a holiday camp in comparison to what I had left behind with this now happy and welcoming atmosphere. It was soon lunch and I was introduced to the other 5 patients. I was informed that I would be kept very busy all day and given a daily program. After lunch we were informed we needed to rest for at least an hour so was pushed to my bed where I was transferred by using a standing hoist. I was pleased to see the call bell was suspended just above my head within easy reach. I wondered then why in Hemel Hempstead a similar thing could not be implemented.

The first thing I was in need off was a haircut so Warren on one of his early visits brought my hair clippers. Going into the shower room I gave myself a number 4 haircut with Warren trimming around my ears and doing the back while Wayne

Kerrin supervised. Wayne was one of my scouts from 1st Kingsburgh and also Warren's friend.

My second priority was that my talons needed to be transformed back to human finger nails. It is sad that while receiving excellent care and attention from the NHS this part of care is left to family members. What if Warren had not arrived? Trillions of dreaded diseases could have manifested themselves under my talons possible wiping out the entire population of England.

The NHS has some stupid ruling probably as a result of a sueing culture prevalent that either a family member or qualified chiropodists, which are generally not available in hospitals, are permitted to cut patient's nails so if you find yourself in my position you are just left with growing fingernails.

A new daily routine began but instead of hating every second I actually looked forward to the next activity.

The morning would usually begin with me waking earlier than everyone else and lying waiting to be taken either to the shower or to a bath. Initially I was taken into the shower room in a shower wheelchair but towards the end of my stay was allowed to stand up while supporting myself against the wall. I was over whelmed with emotion the first time I was able to stand and my tears streamed out of my eyes and so my tear ducts also got a good clean out.

As I was always awake I could normally convince the nurses to take me for my daily wash well before the other patients and so be early for breakfast. I was eager to begin each day and to get on with it.

Occasionally I was taken to a bath and hoisted in with some sort of chairlift. I have never been a person to have baths but these were great and very relaxing. As I liked to get my entire head under the water, on one occasion once the nurses had left the bathroom I purposely slipped forward out of the chair and put my head under the water. What a great feeling! Unfortunately I was unable to get back onto the chair and slipped even more forward towards the drain plug. I battled for a while trying to get back onto the chair but a nurse caught me in my attempts. The nurses had to get a hoist to get me back onto the chair. I was lucky that the drain plug was of a standard size otherwise, 'the baby could have been thrown out with the bath water'. I was banned from using the bath from then on and up until a week or two before I was due to be discharged after I convinced the matron, Flora, that I would behave myself.

Breakfast was served in the day room and I normally had a bowl of cereal, a glass of cranberry juice and a slice of toast with jam. Some Tuesdays a hospital volunteer, Colin, would be there to assist the patients. The jams came in the little plastic containers which I battled to open these with one hand but have since mastered them.

We were given menus for lunch and supper and had to choose ourselves. I especially looked forward to Fridays when fish and chips were served for lunch. The food was so much better at Holywell. After breakfast we would sit around

the table until someone came to fetch us for our morning session. These sessions would be either with a physiotherapist, speech therapist or dietician. The morning sessions lasted until lunch.

My theory on speech therapists was again reinforced as yet again she was a real stunner.

After lunch there was a compulsory hour long rest period before we started the afternoon sessions which were similar to the morning sessions but also included a few others activities such as gardening and cooking which were to encourage and help us relearn some of these basic skills.

Every few days after our daily bath or shower we would be visited by an occupational therapist, Allison Weisener, who would teach us how to dress ourselves. We first had to try dress ourselves but if we were unsuccessful we would be shown. In this way we were encouraged to overcome our own challenges like putting on a shirt or a pair of socks with one hand. I soon learnt and instead of trying to do up buttons on my shirts I would put out a button-less shirt the night before.

Supper followed again in the day room. After supper some people would have visitors while other watched TV. Except for the last two weeks of my stay my sons would visit me

Visiting hours were not strictly set and we could have visitors at any time and if we were in a session they would even be able to join us.

The other patients were mostly friendly and when I heard that it was John's birthday I asked Jean to buy a cake and we all had a piece with a drink. Neither John nor his wife seemed not to appreciate the gesture but that's life. Some people are never grateful. But as I did not do this for man but for God who blesses me abundantly

When I arrived at Holywell my sister Corien was still in the UK but soon returned to SOUTH AFRICA. I had flown both my sons over from South Africa and was seldom short of a visitor. For the first 5 weeks it was Warren and while he was still here Darrel arrived and for a short period I had both my sons visit me each day. These were good times and I looked forward to their visits.

Every so often I choose to do gardening when I would be wheeled outside to a little courtyard where there was a small glasshouse. I could then either sow a few seeds into little pots or else water established plants. Gardening has always been a joy to me so these sessions were most welcome.

Cooking sessions were interesting and as I had for many years fended for myself was no stranger in a kitchen. My sons would bring in the ingredients following a shopping list that I had to make up. On one occasion I made a ham and cheese omelet. I also made blueberry muffins twice. The first time I gave all my muffins to the other patients and some lucky nurses. Somehow I did not keep one for

Jean and she was rightly upset so I tried to undo my omission by offering to make another batch. I have never followed recipes to and in error put in an extra cup of flour. Allison, the occupational therapist spotted my error. I adjusted the error by adding a third egg and slightly more milk. . Allison smiled but the muffins came out better than the first batch and this time the first thing I did was to put one aside for Jean before giving the rest away

I would often look at the other patients and see their progress and wonder how fast my own progress would be. There was never any doubt that I would be fully restored in time. I would also ponder which I would rather have returned first my arm or my leg. Looking back, now after nearly 7 years I think it is that I would rather have my leg as I now manage well with my right arm for most things. With my legs almost fully restored I can at least get around and enjoy life to the full

When I arrived at Holywell I was issued with a manual wheel chair and it was a challenge to steer as I could only use the one wheel to propel myself. It did not take too long before I had developed a technique by which I had to stop and sort of steer with my right foot each time I needed to change direction. I was soon speeding down the corridors and often told to go slower, a story of my life.

At first I was unable to get off the wheel chair and onto my bed and had several lessons in transferring from the wheel chair to my bed using a transfer board. Once this new skill had been mastered I soon learnt to transfer without the need for this transfer board.

At the end of each evening there would usually be a line of 5 wheelchairs of patients waiting to be put to bed. Some of these patients would still be sitting at the dining table in the day room. I have never enjoyed queues and quickly figured out to ask to brush my teeth and go to the loo assisted by a nurse a short while before bed time and so being able to organize myself so that I was ready at the right time and so be put to bed first.

On one occasion I mistimed the operation and then waited for handover time. Handover time was when the outgoing shift would have a short meeting with the incoming shift to discuss the patients.

Once the nurses were in the meeting I sneaked to my bed and managed to transfer myself unaided and soon dosed off. I was awakened by a night shift nurse who wanted to know who had put me to bed. I asked if I had to get out again but she just left me to sleep. I figured that if I put myself to bed while the meeting was on no one would notice but I was wrong.

I noticed another patient with a power wheelchair and asked my physiotherapist if I could also soon be allowed to have one. First I had to pass a power chair driving test. Fortunately the Lord allowed me to retain my driving skills and I easily passed this test and was issued with a power wheel chair and at last did not have to steer with my foot but could use a little joystick.

It was alleged by the nursing staff that I rang the bell too much once I was put to bed so the matron rebuked me. Ok I thought to myself, I know that I have an impatient nature but also a strong will. I will no longer ring the bell when I needed anything and would just plan ahead so began by asking for several bottles in case I needed to go. I was quiet successful and did not ring the bell for several days until one night a patient opposite me fell out of his bed when I thought I was now justified in ringing it again.

Most of the nursing staff were friendly and helpful but as with all human relationships you cannot get on with everyone. There was one nurse who treated me with particular iciness and especially when the soles of my feet would for some reason burn but I none the less tried my best to remain calm and to be nice to her. This attitude paid off and she gradually became more pleasant. There was one nurse by the name of Jody who was particularly friendly and I am sure my sons will also remember her. I was prescribed Amitriptyline Hydrochloride for my burning feet which seemed to give me relief

My first fall took place in the dining room. I wanted to move a perch stool but did not realize how crucial my balance was so when I picked it up in my right hand the weight pulled me over but as I was quick enough to realize what was happening so just held on tightly which prevented me from hitting the floor. After that I had several falls but I soon learnt to fall like a child by just collapsing my legs so none of my falls were ever serious.

One evening while visited by our church's administrator and sitting on a recliner chair and wearing a nylon type track suit I suddenly started sliding forward. I realized that I was slipping and also I knew that there was an emergency bell on my right hand side so quickly pushed it. I ended on the floor on my bottom but the nurses soon responded to the emergency bell and arranged a sling hoist to lift me off the floor

Sitting in a wheelchair all day is not fun and soon your bottom becomes sore. My sons and I would often play monopoly at the dining table so when my bottom became sore I would ask one of them to take me for a ride around the hospital or outside. This would relieve the pain for a little while. How I looked forward to the day I did not have to sit all day!

After an occupational therapist went to my former home it was assessed as no longer being suitable as the stairway was too steep so I was not allowed to return back to it. Some sort of new accommodation had to be found and Darrel applied for council housing on my behalf. As I was not allowed to exceed a stay of 8 weeks at Holywell and still a search began to move me to some sort of temporary accommodation and was allowed to remain at Holywell for another 2 weeks.

I am extremely thankful to the NHS for resources they provided me with. Just prior to being discharged my occupational therapist assessed my needs and

issued with a quad walking stick some non slip material, a bread spreader and a 3 sizes jar holder. I was also loaned a standing frame for use for exercises while at St. Michaels respite home I was to go to next. Hertfordshire wheelchair services also loaned me a wheel chair which I would use for over a year.

After I had served my time at Holywell and was about to be taken by a special wheelchair ambulance I was pushed towards the exit in my wheel chair by a nurse by the name of 'Barbara'. Just before to main doors I asked her to stop. I got out of the wheelchair and in God's strength walked the few steps out through the door fulfilling a promise I made some ten weeks earlier.