

IAN RANKIN

I was a timid, risk-averse kid. Not sporty; pretty terrified of heights. Happier with my comics and music in my bedroom than on the sports field or a racing bike. So I never cut myself badly or suffered a concussion or broke any bones. I was also healthy (or do I mean lucky?) – no tonsils or appendix requiring removal – meaning I was no great burden to any NHS hospital. Mind you, I grew up in the halcyon days of home GP visits and I did catch every childhood ailment going: mumps, measles, chickenpox, you name it.

My lucky streak ended, however, in 1979, the year I turned nineteen. My mother died of cancer that June, having been increasingly ill for the previous eight months. I was still processing that when, in August, I had to take time off work (a chicken hatchery near my home in Fife) because I was suffering blinding headaches. The initial diagnosis was a migraine but the prescribed tablets didn't help in the least. I ended up unable to get out of bed and,

after my father's traditional cure (a vinegar-soaked cloth on the forehead) proved ineffectual, a home visit by our GP led to a new diagnosis of meningitis.

I was rushed into hospital and given a lumbar puncture. Curled in the foetal position, I didn't see the liquid spurt halfway across the room from my spinal column but the attendants assured me it was a spectacular display. (I dare say these days a phone might have captured the moment for internet posterity.) Along the way, I was also found to be giving a home to some form of salmonella bacteria. I was confined to a room of my own with a TV and radio, so once the various procedures had been dealt with I could relax and wait for the all-clear.

The nursing staff were great, lingering especially long if a good film was playing of an evening (Clint Eastwood was a favourite). I also recorded in my diary that my consultant would breeze in at daily intervals, do the crossword in my newspaper, then breeze out again, leaving me one less means of passing the time.

If the hospital was understaffed or under-resourced, everyone did a good job of hiding it from the patient. My father is long dead now, but thinking back, I do wonder at the stress and worry he must have felt in those few brief months. Me, I was young and bored, mostly. A friend sent a Snoopy book and Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Both sustained me in a way the Chaucer I was supposed to be studying (I was in the hinterland between first and second years at university) could not.

I was not to make much use of the NHS in the fifteen years that followed. However, in 1994 my son was born with special needs. He was our second child and at first we were fairly relaxed. We had read the parenting books and knew that infants developed at different rates. Finally, around the age of nine months, we had a diagnosis of Angelman Syndrome. Children's hospitals and paediatric specialists became the norm for a time as he was tested and tested and tested again. There were seizures to be controlled and scoliosis (curvature of the spine) was yet one more problem to be factored in. The doctors and nurses got to know us and we got to know them.

Our son is in his mid-twenties now. He grew out of the seizures and the scoliosis did not worsen appreciably. But he cannot walk or feed himself or communicate, so whenever he is under the weather there are always more tests and procedures and tense waits for answers. Nor is he always the most accommodating client. It takes three of us to cajole and control him when his teeth need to have their regular examination, and dental procedures beyond a check-up require a hospital visit and general anaesthetic. It doesn't help that he has arms like an octopus and an uncanny ability to notice and then attach his vice-like grip to the one thing in the room you wish he wouldn't.

The people I've encountered in every area of the NHS have been professional, caring, empathetic and patient. The GP of *Dr Finlay's Casebook* may be a thing of the past, but our GP practice in Edinburgh has always been there

for us. The virus of 2020 has reminded us how much we depend on these professionals – from the hospital porters and cleaners right up to the most senior consultants and surgeons. They are ordinary people doing often extraordinary things. Those vinegar compresses – however well-meant – were not going to save my life and all the parental love in the world was not going to ameliorate my son's condition. But the NHS did, and the NHS do.

And I know I'm by no means alone in being indebted to them.