Holding the NHS Line

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The National Health Service (NHS) was born on 5th July 1948 and I was born on 15th January 1949, so our great healthcare institution and this too frequent “service user” have walked in step for 68 years.

Now sadly our iconic NHS is under siege, with so many of you who work in it being understandably tired and demoralised.

Being on the front line, as you all are, trying to do your utmost to contain the unfolding crisis it's difficult to take the long view, so as a long-term patient perhaps I can try to explain what a staggering difference you've all made, not only to my life but also to the lives of millions of others.

I never knew my grandparents, Mary, Jack, Tom and Betsy. They all died at least a decade before the NHS and I were born, 3 of them from preventable illnesses but too poor to pay for a doctor. I never knew my mother, father, aunts or uncles without false teeth: gingivitis was endemic in poor communities, and it was common to have all your teeth out and a full set of dentures made as a 21st birthday present to forestall regular payments to a dentist later on. Yes, really! Smoking Capstan Full Strength or Woodbines was held to be a sure protection against infection; when my dad qualified as a Sanitary Inspector (an Environmental Health Officer nowadays!) in the early 1930's his patch was a notorious slum area in Leeds, so he was given a packet of Capstan every week by his boss and instructed to light up before entering any of the houses. Until recently I still had a wooden lamp-base he earned with the coupons from the packets! You'll be pleased to know that he gave up smoking in the late 1940's.

However on that July day in 1948 a revolution happened. The lives of millions of ordinary people were transformed as the fear of illness and the ensuing struggle to pay for treatment became a thing of the past. Previously, with no such thing as sick pay, keeping in work was the only thing that mattered, often at the cost of ignoring serious illness.

Barely 6 months after the start of the NHS my mother at almost 40 gave birth to me at home (as was the norm), but it all went horribly wrong. She and I were whisked off to hospital where we were both saved in the nick of time. A few years earlier and it might have been a different story as hesitating about the cost could well have seen both of us dead.

I may have been alive but, according to my sister who was nearly 12 at the time, I was a “pathetic runt”. Picture an infant who wheezed with asthma, sniffed and dripped while everything creaked and whistled in her head, itched and scratched with evil eczema and, as a bonus, had a “lazy” eye. Pitiful, isn't it?

But what a fortunate time for such a wreck to be born! The National Welfare Food Service was providing large silver tins of National Dried Full Cream Milk for Babies, bottles of thick, fortified orange juice and Cod Liver Oil – all available at the new NHS Baby Clinic. The tins lined the shelves of my dad's shed for years, useful for screws, nails, fuses, string, etc. The school doctor visited my primary school annually, as did the school dentist and an optician service. We were all screened for flat feet by dipping our feet in water and leaving wet footprints on the lino in the school hall. Charts with coloured blobs were held up to weed out the colour blind, and the optician fitted me with nasty – but free – round pink spectacles with an opaque patch over my “good eye” in the hope that it would wake up my “lazy” one. Lines of children formed up in the corridor to either be immunised or to have their hair examined by “Nitty Nora”, the nit nurse. I too had nits, of course.

By 1960 when I was 11 the NHS had whipped out my tonsils and adenoids, identified my multitude of allergies by

the pin prick test on my arms, and had provided me with Ventolin inhalers that instantly and miraculously put a stop to my strangling purple-faced asthma episodes. By the time the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Mary Quant, Twiggy *et al* crashed on to the scene I was able to go out confidently without a paper bag over my head. Being able to strut my stuff in front of Ray Davies and the Kinks at the Winter Gardens on Morecambe prom with both eyes looking in the same direction, unblemished skin and no dewdrop on the end of my nose was entirely due to the NHS's tireless attention in the 50's and early 60's.

Mind you, the environments in which all those interventions happened were something of an endurance test. For example, GP's were regarded with reverential awe. If Dr Jones had to be called out to snatch me from the jaws of a gargling, asthmatic death then Mum would swiftly drape me on a chair and make up my bed with her best linen trimmed with rose-strewn frills. Then, as the front door closed behind him on his way out, the best linen was folded back in the dressing table and I went back to her “basics” range.

Down at the surgery, the ground floor of Dr Jones' large house, the atmosphere reeked of gloom, burning dust from the one-bar electric fire and damp raincoats. The smell of naphthalene filled the room on dry winter days, thanks to the moth balls in the pockets of coats kept “for best”. Everyone dressed smartly for their appointment with the doctor and Mum wore her hat – respect! Bentwood chairs lined the walls, ancient Country Life magazines were fanned out on the low table and no one spoke except in a whisper. Occasionally someone had a near-death coughing fit and all eyes avoided looking at the culprit or at each other. Children were imprisoned on laps, whining quietly and immediately shushed. At the summons we silently sat down in the consulting room. Dr Jones didn't look up until it suited him. Mum stammered something, I said “aaaah” and off we went to the dispensary next door with a stamped script. In exchange we were given a linctus, an embrocation or a tiny round white lidded cardboard box containing tiny white pills. Nothing was ever explained and we wouldn't have dreamt of asking.

Compare that with the buzzing Lancaster practice I attend now – toys and books for the children, comfortable chairs, quiet chat between patients, friendly and obliging receptionists, GP's who talk to me as an equal and explain things with clarity and humour, telephone consultations, electronic prescriptions and so on.

In my almost 7 decades I've had major spine surgery twice, facial surgery, expensive respiratory inhalers regularly, MRI scans, gamma cameras, CT scans, Dexa scans, mammograms and various “-oscopies”. I've been dispatched to Active Health and to Pulmonary Rehabilitation, while St Mary's Genetic Hospital in Manchester revealed that I have the BRCA2 gene and offered me preventative breast surgery. I kept my elderly appendages but did have my ovaries and fallopian tubes removed, while an annual mammogram reassures me.

All of this has been free.

I'm here, still standing and very busy thanks to the vigilance, skill and endless kindness of everyone who works in the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Trust and in my GP practice. I know I'm an expensive patient but I am eternally grateful.

Hold the line – all of you are dazzlingly clever and you help run an institution that's the envy of the world and the saviour of many.

I salute you.