



Treatment by Numbers

by Chris Robinson

“Morning Christina, my name is Charlotte and I’ll be looking after you this morning”.

“Hi” I say brightly. “It’s nice to meet you”.

Charlotte picks up my file and asks me to confirm my name and date and birth. A request that would be repeated regularly throughout the day.

She flicks through a few more pages and then says “Ah, I see it’s a big one today”.

“So I understand “ I reply pulling a pained face as I do so.

“I’m sure Dr Hajela has explained the procedure in detail but I am required to make sure you understand what is going to happen and answer any questions you may have.”

Charlotte pulls the curtains around the bed and sits down next to me. “The infusion will take twelve hours. Unfortunately you cannot eat during treatment but you can sip water. We will also put you on a glucose drip to keep your strength up. If you feel giddy, breathless or in pain at any time during treatment then call one of us immediately. The whole procedure should take about twelve hours.

Charlotte takes my blood pressure and pulse. “All looking good” she says. “If you don’t have any questions then I’ll call the registrar to put your cannula in”.

I nod. I just want to get on with it now. We left home two hours ago and I’m already fed up. I start doing the maths in my head. Left home at 6am. Got here at 8.00am but wasn’t admitted till 9am. That’s three hours already. If the doctor comes soon and gets my infusion going by 10am then I’ll be out of here in 13 hours time. What time will that be? My mind can’t compute. I’m tired and weak and I can’t work out how long I’m going to be here for. My eyes well up. It’s all too much

Charlotte has gone and I survey my surroundings. There are six beds in the ward and four are occupied. I quickly scan the other patients being careful to avoid eye contact. I don't want to smile at anyone and I certainly do not want to speak to any of them. I've been caught out like that before. My last infusion was only four hours but felt like twenty four because of the loud, talkative woman in the next bed to me. She acted like we had been friends forever. We didn't know each other at all but she seemed to think that our illnesses gave us an instant bond. Like being in a secret gang. I had a good book to read and some magazines. I'd even got some colouring books too but I didn't open any of them because she thought I would prefer to know all about her ailments, her family problems, her grandchildren's achievements and so on. This time though I am prepared. I have invested in some enormous headphones and downloaded enough box sets to last me three months. No one is going to talk to me today.

Its 10.30 and the doctor has only just arrived to put my cannula in. He asks the nurse where the infusion is. It's still in transit from the pharmacy apparently. He says he will come back and put the cannula in when the product arrives. He wants to start the infusion off himself as it is a drug still in its infancy. The doctor leaves. I replace my headphones.

I must have dozed off as I am woken by Charlotte telling me that the doctor will be back in the next half an hour. I look at the clock. It's 11.45am. I have been here since 8am and we haven't even started yet. My stomach groans. I am starving so I ring the bell. Charlotte eventually comes. I ask her for something to eat and drink but she says it's not possible. I snap inside but outwardly I smile and say "Oh well, it was worth a try". She says she will get the glucose drip going when the cannula goes in which will make me feel better.

1pm and Charlotte comes to say goodbye. Her shift is over and she introduces me to Gail who will be my nurse for the rest of the day. "Have you got an update?" I ask timidly. No one has apologised or explained the delay to me which weirdly makes me reluctant to complain. The normalisation of the situation by the staff seems to make any gripes I have sound unreasonable. I am completely subservient.

2pm and the doctor is back. He does apologise for 'the wait' but doesn't offer an explanation and I don't ask for one. Needles pierce my skin. A cold flush of water soars through my veins making me wince and a few minutes later the infusion is up and running.

Gail sets the timer and the number 12 flashes up in red. She pushes another button and the clock starts its slow countdown. I lay back on the bed and replace my headphones trying to concentrate on an episode of House of Cards but it's impossible. My eyes keep wandering to the digital screen flashing beside me, every minute taking longer than the one before. A lady comes in and sits on the bed next to me. She looks around nervously. Our eyes lock and I remove my headphones. Smiling I say "Hi I'm Chris. Is this your first time?" and we begin to talk.