



A new room with a view

Checking out the new Tweed Valley Hospital. Photo Christobel Munson

Unexpectedly, staff writer Christobel Munson, woke at 4am one January day in need of urgent medical help. Now living alone, she called 000. This is her account of what happened next.

Within 10 minutes, the ambulance arrived. I had already dressed, got together an overnight bag, and was waiting out the front, clutching

my painful abdomen. Two capable young women packed me into their ambulance, and immediately hooked me up to a cannula, which stayed put for the next four or five days.

Arriving at Byron Bay Hospital around 9am, the young doctor on duty, eager and helpful, observed my situation throughout the day. Over many hours, pain relief was provided,

various samples taken, and finally, a couple of MRI scans.

There was nothing to do but observe the bustling everyday activity of the Emergency room. A three-year-old girl had badly cut herself running into a glass wall. Her entire holidaying family seemed to converge on the other side of my curtain, discussing the situation in detail. Finally – thankfully! – she was stitched up and they all left.

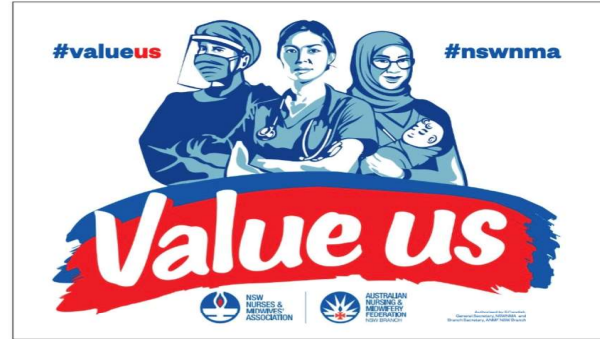
Throughout the day, the mood among the staff was quietly efficient. Dramas were dealt with without fuss. I never felt neglected, despite being in what felt like a pretty full house.

The results of the second MRI catapulted my doctor into action. As I am of 'a certain age', I could see he was conflicted. Should he touch my arm as he passed on the sobering news? Or would I take offence? In the end, he explained that I'd need to be transferred immediately to Tweed Valley Hospital for an operation not possible in Byron.

As it happened, the same pair of ambos (in the middle of a 12-hour shift, operating throughout the Northern Rivers) happened to be passing the hospital entrance when the call went out to transport me up the coast. Once again, they packed me into their ambulance, and we burned up the highway to Tweed Valley Hospital. Phase Two began.

On arrival, one of the very few medical men I encountered in the next five days, carefully – and succinctly – explained what was to happen next. I was about to have an operation to see what was happening in my bowel. Theatre was prepped and waiting for me to arrive by trolley. There were various options: some more complex than others. None of them sounded all that much fun – but by far the most revolting and agonising step was inserting a plastic tube into my nostril and down my throat. It remained there, uncomfortably, for more than 24 hours.

Once the trolley slid into the theatre, I met the head anaesthetist, a firmly spoken woman, and the operating surgeon, another extremely capable-seeming woman. Glancing around the operating room I saw about 19 others – all women, quietly competent, and ready for this next case. Me. It must have been about 8pm. The lights went out.



When I came to, I found my body was studded with cords, clips and pipes, plus sticky tape and tubes. A lovely Brazilian orderly, Bruno, had trolley duty, paired with a French nurse, Sarah, from Toulouse. We tried out our French on each other as they shunted me from the recovery room to my home for the coming days. The mood was fun and lighthearted, especially as my initial pain ceased during the operation. (Later I learned that the gas used to inflate my abdomen had untwisted my blocked bowel, so no further surgery had been required).

The first day or two after theatre was not all that much fun. The horrible nasal tube irritated. Observations ('obs') were taken at frequent intervals. Nurses – all female – came and went in shifts, always courteously introducing themselves at each new shift. Having last been in hospital for more than 24 hours only when I gave birth some decades past, I had no idea what to expect, so was agog pretty much most of the time, just watching the passing parade.

I noted the 'mood' of the staff, though 'mood' isn't quiet the word I'd like to use. It was the atmosphere created by the most efficient team of workers I think I have ever observed, in any working environment, anywhere in the

world. The pace was relentless. The demand for careful attention was high. Every single encounter I observed – from every extremely capable nurse who came to my bed to check my blood pressure and temperature, to the team of doctors doing their morning rounds, to the person who'd check my choices for the next meal, to the cleaners – every single person was on high alert, and performing at maximum capacity, with unceasing, caring, unwavering focused attention.

Several times I heard people whistling or singing as they bustled up and down the corridors. In the middle of one night, I overheard an intense and serious discussion, apparently between department heads. One required a particular item; the other had control of a finite budget. I don't recall the details but was mightily impressed at the manner in which each one clearly presented her case, until a workable outcome was reached. All in about 10 minutes.

Over the days, I counted at least 12 different nationalities working together harmoniously, a tribute to our multicultural society.

Once the horrible nasal tube was removed and I was encouraged to go wandering, I did. I needed to 'reboot my internal organs' if I was going to be allowed to go home. One morning

as I was wandering around the corridors, I saw two of the younger nurses, actually skipping down the corridor at the start of the shift, telling each other what a great day it was going to be. At 3am, a nurse taking my obs, who was wearing in a new pair of shoes, was worried that she still had to write up 20 obs in the two remaining hours on her shift. Out of nowhere, she added: "I love my job!"

This is a spectacular new hospital. Every window in every corridor has stunning views: Mount Warning one way; Tweed Heads and the ocean another. Fields of sunflowers in one direction; banana plantations in the other. From the upper levels, newly planted gardens have been planted to please the eye viewed from above.

Once there was finally 'movement at the station', it was time to leave. Another friendly orderly took me by wheelchair to the Transit Lounge on the ground floor, with priority parking right outside. This huge, airy space accommodates dozens of exiting patients, enjoying sandwiches and drinks, while awaiting their leaving medications and discharge paperwork. Family and friends don't have to battle their way up to your room in one of the many towers to collect you. A thoughtful design feature.

While I only saw the parts of the hospital which related to my situation, the features and design of the building was impressive, and the vibe pleasant throughout. But most importantly the unbelievable quality of the staff at every level – but in particular the tremendous nursing staff. If they want a 15% raise in salary, in my opinion, they're worth every cent!

No one wants to be in hospital, but if it has to happen, it's assuring to know that such skilled staff and facilities are available to us.

Tweed Valley Hospital:
nswlhd.health.nsw.gov.au/hospitals/tweed-valley-hospital

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