

## A spoonful of sweetener – by Lisa Hutchins



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*Written in August 2005:* Today's hospital visit is thankfully routine - to the clinic of the least alarming of one of our three current sets of specialists. This rates very low on the anxiety scale and so leaves plenty of time for watching the humorous behaviour of all the other people present. For a start, the two nurses administering the clinic are having a turf war. A fairly gentle and polite one, but a turf war nonetheless.

Things have come to a head over patient records. "I don't like the system you are using here," says the younger of the two. The look on the older nurse's face is extremely expressive. Thick folders of notes – how gloriously old-fashioned the health service still is – in all kinds of colours are placed on counters and in trolleys as if they were chess pieces. Each nurse has a list – a separate list, ordered according to the preferred system of each nurse – on which items are ticked off. Every time a new patient appears, each separate list, and therefore each separate nurse, has to be consulted. Occasionally tensions come to the surface, over things like a lost referral letter or a patient who, in the nurses' terms, does not exist because there is no thick file of records that anyone can locate. Tempers flare, very briefly. People get quite irritable.

Plus, the doctors are conspiring to make their lives much harder than necessary. There is a patient in Keats ward with a standing appointment. Is the patient well enough to come down, or will they require a ward visit? Where are their notes? Has anyone seen them? The doctors need to have a conference about this case. We are waiting for the registrar, and the consultant is holding an adjacent clinic just down the hall. A very tall and self-important young house officer is flitting between the two, making phone calls, disturbing the nurses' system, being indispensable. Whenever the consultant makes a dash down here to see the registrar, he has a patient with him, his door firmly closed. "He's the consultant," murmurs my Aged Relative reverently as he hurries past. Whenever the registrar strides off up the hall to see the consultant he is similarly occupied. Eventually they are all hustled into the same place by various nurses, nurse practitioners and secretaries and all clinics are suspended for a few minutes while they talk.

While the nurses are quietly feuding, and the doctors talking among themselves, a queue is building up. One elderly man of Druidical appearance has arrived. He is immensely fat, has long white hair tied back off his face and a magisterial beard which divides into two peaks somewhere in the region of his chest. Aged Relative, who has never been noted for tact, is staring with his mouth open. He has to be quietly reminded that it is no longer 1950 and, if elderly gentlemen want to cultivate long hair

and impressive beards, they are perfectly free to do so without fear of hostile scrutiny in Outpatients. As I have had occasion to remark before, people under 70 are a rarity in hospitals and most of the attenders here are men of retirement age and above, usually accompanied by their spouses. As we sit, and Aged Relative twitches with impatience and wonders loudly whether he is next, a new couple arrives. Hurried footsteps in the corridor and a woman with a tight perm and a pastel-coloured jacket materialises in front of the nurses. "Two together here" she says briskly, pointing at a couple of vacant seats. Her cowed husband sits where he is told. She bustles up to the desk and confronts both nurses, and both lists. "Yes, that's his name. Yes, that's his date of birth. Yes, we've booked in already" before retreating to her seat in the face of the System. Meanwhile, the nurses are struggling to lift a set of notes as thick as a breezeblock. "That's mine, that's mine," says Aged Relative in high excitement for, after all, it is only 40 minutes after his appointment time.

But he must wait a bit longer because it is time for coffee. The registrar emerges from his room and booms something about having his "with one sweetener." The nurses nod. The pastel-coloured woman bobs up. "Excuse me," she says. "Excuse me, do you need a sweetener? I've got a sweetener." The nurses look up surprised. "No," they say in perfect unison. "We have sweeteners."