

## **Afloat in the Royal Melbourne Hospital**

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I went to speak to Dave, but instead of words, a bag of chaff opened inside my mouth and blew into the wind.

I'd been sick for several days with what I thought was gastro, before collapsing one morning into a strange delirium. An ambulance arrived, only it wasn't an ambulance. It was a small van with canvas walls and roof and then it became a pencil case. The pencil case ambulance was for people like me who were not sick enough to be taken to hospital in big shiny ambulances with all the trimmings.

Some cheerful young nurses in bright uniforms, gothic hair dos and tats welcomed us to the Royal Melbourne Hospital's Emergency Department. Soon they were not nurses, and I was not me. They were mechanics, and I was a car; specifically I was the green Volkswagon beetle that I had owned back in the 1960s. The mechanics opened the bonnet and hooked me up for a full service with oxygen and a spaghetti junction of tubes and testing devices.

Drifting pleasantly in and out of consciousness, I began to levitate, and soon was flying magically around the hospital building, which was transparent. I popped into various storeys, departments and wards, noting with interest the medical goings-on between doctors and patients.

I have no recollection of the chest X-Ray that revealed the cause of my illness: an atypical pneumonia infection that had taken over my left lung. When I learned I had pneumonia, I went into the massive germ factory hiding in my respectable breast. It was pretending to be gastro, but was like an illegal drug plant in a quiet suburban street. With billions of bacteria bubbling and dividing in a sea of pus, it was not a pretty sight.

At the end of the day, after with oxygen, a drip, an antibiotic drip in one arm, and an antibiotic injection in the other, the crisis abated. I took in that I was too sick to go home and would be transferred to the respiratory ward on Level 5. I saw the respiratory doctors as a group of green filaments concentrated in Level 5 and floating about the emergency department like clusters of seaweed.

Then Matt, a young doctor who looked about 18, thanked everyone and said that the paper work for my ascent to the ward had now been completed. Everyone said goodbye to me, including Dave, who had been with me all day. Having been in Emergency for the last 8 hours, albeit asleep for most of the time, saying goodbye was a bit sad.

There followed four days of ward life, which, never having been seriously ill or admitted to a hospital before, was a revelation. I fell in love with Shiby, a delightful young woman from Kerala who saw to my every need for the first few days and got me laughing. Other nurses, mainly female, and from all parts of the world, worked with unceasing care, efficiency and good humour to dispense medicines, check vital signs and assist me and other patients with their intimate needs.

In the bed next to me was an elderly woman who was in pain, confused and calling out after a fall in the supermarket. I marvelled at the careful medical attention, patience and respect with which they treated her. The medical team popped in daily to check me out and tell the gathered students about my case. But it was the nursing staff, carrying out treatments, making beds, caring, organising and liaising who were at the centre of it all.

Later at night I watched the play of lights around streets still congested with traffic, the North Melbourne Town Hall, the giant ferris wheel, the Bolte Bridge and the Westgate Bridge beyond. The Royal Melbourne Hospital had been an icon for as long as

I could remember, and I felt an odd twinge of pride in being a patient there.

I thought of, and mentally thanked our activist forebears who had fought for and built our state-of-the-art public health system, the envy of nations world-wide. All that work and medication over four days hadn't cost me a penny!

I thought about the health activists of today who are working to resist the neoliberal rush to colonise and chop up Medibank and turn it into private, profit-making enterprises. I thought of Melbourne's vast suburban backblocks and teeming overpopulation. In ten years' time, will the mighty Royal Melbourne Hospital and other hospitals be able to meet the health needs and crises of a million more people with the same standard of excellence?

Newly discharged, I walked barefoot through the hospital foyer, clinging onto Dave's arm. I felt enriched by my hospital experience, hallucinatory travels and memories of small but precious human interactions. It was a fantastic week.

