

Conversation with Mary and Eileen Brennan, April 2012

Mary

My husband and I were both living in London in 1949 and working at the Whittington Hospital in North London: I was a staff nurse in maternity and Jim was a staff nurse on a medical ward. It was unusual then for men to be in nursing. During the war Jim had been in the Army in the ambulance service, so afterwards was encouraged to train as a nurse. In 1949 we were still courting and the idea of working away from London seemed attractive. I think Jim must have seen an advertisement for the job at Stoke Mandeville and there was something in it that was family oriented – it seemed to welcome the idea of both of us working at the hospital. Anyway, he got that job and started in 1949 or 1950; he was working on Ward 2 in recovery and rehabilitation. There weren't many male nurses at Stoke at the time (plenty of orderlies but not actual nurses) and I think Guttman wanted more men as nurses because of the nature of the work on the spinal wards, there being so much lifting of patients. For the while I was still back in London and Jimmy came back to London at weekends when I was off-duty. We got married back in London in 1952 and we were given accommodation in Southcourt then in 1953 my daughter was born and we then moved to Stoke Mandeville. One of the attractions was the possibility of getting a house with the job; no. 2 bungalow Stoke Mandeville; it was one of the two bungalows that stood either side of the entrance gates.

In 1970 (I think it opened in the late 60's early 70) I was given a part time sisters post (very unusual in those days) so that I could join Jimmy and help run the new rehabilitation hostel, what became the "Sir Ludwig Guttman Hostel". This was a sort of half-way house for rehabilitated spinal injury patients where they would learn life skills before moving back out to their families or to start living independently. It was quite a revolutionary thing at the time. There were patients studying there for open degrees and other qualifications. I remember there was one tetraplegic patient there who was writing a book; and in his room there was this elaborate piece of equipment that allowed him to type using his mouth as he had no movement below his neck. He would blow into a tube and the air pressure would then make a projector shine letters of the alphabet onto the wall in front of him; as he blew harder it moved through all the letters of the alphabet, shining them on the wall in turn; when he arrived at the letter he wanted he would stop blowing and his machine would type that letter. I think this was a machine developed by someone who had connections with the hospital.

The patients had their own furniture in the hostel; including a drinks cabinet. All the sisters used to have a bottle of 'medicinal' brandy in the cupboard on their wards; alcohol was quite acceptable within the hospital.

Although the hostel was a way back to the outside world for some, many of the older people were permanent residents who lived there until they died. One of these long-term residents at the hostel was Mr Swissker; he repaired clocks for everyone; his bedroom had basically turned into a workshop and he sat in the middle of it surrounded by his tools and clocks and watches. There was also workshops where some of the men did carpentry and wheelchair repairs, fixing spokes and so on.

Some paraplegics who had gone out back to their families also came back at the very end of their lives to die there, especially when their condition became too difficult for them to be looked after at home. So part of it was offering respite and terminal care to patients at the end. If you were a

paraplegic who had been through Stoke it became a huge part of your life, both socially and medically, what with coming back every year for check-ups, returning for the games and so on and for many of the older patients it seemed the natural place to return to die. I remember patients like Morris Gressor Stenton and John Pratt who made their home in the hostel; Jimmy could make it more homely than the main hospital. A number of paraplegics chose to return there for care at the end of their lives, it would be similar to what is called a hospice today, although we never used the term. The philosophy of a dignified end of life pathway was very important to Jimmy.

Guttman used to come and do ward inspections of the hostel patients once a week. We were always well-prepared and we knew exactly what he was going to do. He would examine each of the patients very thoroughly looking for red marks or sores that we hadn't already told him about. . He demanded a very high standard of care from us. He used to get mad if people weren't up and about. He would want to know why patients were still in bed and not being productive and using the workshop facilities. He just couldn't stand people being lazy. People would have to toe the line and see that they weren't in here just for fun.

My husband Jim would never hear a word said against Guttman and Guttman trusted him. I remember he travelled with Guttman and a patient to a conference in Copenhagen in 1962 to show how well his treatment had progressed. Jim was there to look after the patient. I think it was the first time that a tetraplegic had been flown on a commercial flight and it was hugely complicated; I think they had to have respirators for him because he had had a tracheotomy. But then Jim would never get flustered by a situation; he could catheterise a patient while they were on a plane or whatever and he had a really good relationship with Poppa; for Guttman, he was someone he could trust and rely on.

Eileen (daughter of Mary)

We kids all grew up in the hospital surrounded by people in wheelchairs. We found it absolutely normal. It was only when we went into Aylesbury with people, often our friends, in wheelchairs that we saw other people staring at them and, on at least one occasion, a mother pulling her children away and not letting them go near as if it was something that you could catch! This was a completely alien concept for us as kids and it was a shock to discover the attitude that lots of other people had.

When mum and dad were working at the hostel dad would do the day shift until 4.30 and then mum would relieve him and do the evening shift. It was all very local; Dad would get up at the bungalow, get out his bike and just cycle around the corner to work; the hostel was just behind the old prefab wards, the new Spinal Injuries centre is built over it now. It was a very family affair; there were seven of us kids by then and we often used to go in there to play and crawl around over the patients' beds. My older brother used to go and get their newspapers for them; and I remember my dad used to bring the dog in too and it would leap about and jump all over the beds.

There seemed to be a lot more care taken of the hospital back then, not just of the medical facilities but of everything. I remember there were loads of gardeners tending the flower beds and mowing the lawns which always looked immaculate. We were totally looked after in our hospital

accommodation; there were always painters or electricians coming round to mend things; men to repair the windows

When the Nationals or the International Games were on in June and July we simply didn't see dad for weeks as he used to do the first aid for all the teams; he had this medical room over at the stadium when the games were on and he would deal with anything that happened and he had a doctor he could call on if it was serious. The teams all had their own people, but if they needed extra care because something had gone wrong then he would be there: maybe urine retention or bowel problems, cuts and bruises; and then there were often broken legs; the athletes would often do that bang into something and break a bone, but not necessarily realise straight away as they couldn't feel anything.

I can remember the games just seemed to get bigger and bigger – and of course more commercial too. When we were kids it all seemed to happen in the playing fields around the hospital with huge great tents put up for the table tennis. It was always in the school holidays and like all the other local kids we used to help out with things like picking up the ping pong balls in the table tennis tents or pushing patients back to the hospital for their meals. Once the money had been raised for the stadium it started to change; it got a lot more sophisticated and business-like. For a start lots more people started to come to the games; where previously it had just been staff and patients and their families, now there really was an audience. Previously you could only get a maximum of 100 people around the basketball to watch; it wasn't really about spectating back then, it was more about supporting people. Stoke Mandeville became a bit of a 'brand'. I remember the endless fund-raising campaigns, 'Be a brick and buy a brick' and so on. I suppose for us kids growing up in the hospital it just became a lot less personal. We knew all the people; we lived it; this is what we did every June and July.