Pikey's Progress: The Radiotherapy Village

They call it 'The Radiotherapy Village' but before you reach it you have to travel through 'The Welcome Village', which is, well….very welcoming.

The first thing you notice are the ornate cottages and its utter charm, reminiscent of days gone by – it even has a telephone box.

The local policeman approaches me and shakes me by the hand.

"You must be the Village idiot; we have been expecting you."

I explain that, despite the appearances to the contrary I am not, in fact, the Village idiot but have been referred to the radiotherapy department as the next part of my treatment for prostate cancer and a polite young man tells me where to go – that tends to happen a lot – and I alight at the aforesaid Radiotherapy Village and approach the reception desk where a motherly receptionist asks my name.

"As in 'Stupid Boy'", she observes, and tells me where to go – this is becoming a habit.

Not long afterwards Tom comes to see me and thoughtfully says:

"I know you might be a little nervous as this is your first day but I will talk you through the process", at which point the receptionist walks by collecting empty jugs of water. "The first thing you must remember is that she is in charge", asserts Tom, "and what she says goes."

Not long afterwards Ben appears. He had called me on the previous Friday to confirm my treatment and produced a schedule of appointments that covered every week day for the next four weeks which varied in times from 9-15 in the morning until 5-15 in the evening.

I explained that I had a busy life-style which involved such things as Old Wilsonian lunches, cricket meeting, gardening stints and trying to bring down the government with the help of the likes of Unite and the TUC and he said he would try and re-arrange some of the appointments to accommodate these.

"The Old Wilsonians seem to be a bit demanding", he observed "and I'll do anything I can to help you bring down the government."

Before you have radiotherapy you must have empty bowels and a full bladder – you try emptying your bowels without emptying your bladder at the same time – and need to be naked, although you are allowed to keep your shirt and socks on; it's a bit like the innovation ceremony for joining 'The Bullingdon Club.'

You have to arrive an hour before your appointment and when a nurse tells you to "Start drinking now" you must empty your bladder and then drink a specific amount of water before the treatment can take place.

Eventually you are told "You can get changed now", and also to which radiotherapy area you will need to go – there are eight of them in total.

Sometimes you can go straight in, depending on the previous patient, but every time they scan your bladder to make sure it is full enough – if not you have to drink some more water until it is.

This can be problematic - sometimes there is a delay as they treat another patient as you drink the requisite amount of water.

"How do you feel now" I was often asked.

"I'm certainly full – is it alright if I lose a little?"

"I would not advise it, comes the pragmatic and sensible reply.

Counting backwards form 100, with intervals of seven, sometimes helps, although you discover that you can only get down to 2 and then have to count upwards again, whilst getting Rachel Riley to hold your hand whilst you are doing so also has its benefits.

Once in the radiotherapy area you take off the hospital gowns, which you wear only in the name of common decency, and are told to lie down on a blue mat and as attired as previously described.

A week or so before my first appointment I had a CT scan at which three marks were appended to the lower part of my stomach to help the experts line-up my body so that it is in the exact same place every time before the treatment starts.

Once the radiotherapist is happy that your body is in the correct position the staff tell you they are about to leave the room and the therapy begins – they do so because they cannot be exposed to the radiation that is about to be transmitted; remember, they are working all day and five days a week in order to help those having the treatment.

The therapy lasts for less than 15 minutes and it is painless. Something akin to a Ferris wheel circles above your body, there are a few clicks along the way and then someone tells you it has finished and you take your mat home with you and prepare for the next day's session.

You rarely get the same radiographer, although this does happen occasionally.

"I tend to be a bit bossy", explained one as he busily went about his business.

"Can you do anything about this music?" I asked, which was as inspiring as one of those infuriating drones you get when hanging on the line when trying to contact an insurance company: "You are number 74 in a queue; your call is important to us; someone we will be with you shortly.'

"Of course; what would you like?", came the encouraging reply.

"Have you got any Neil Young" I inquired and almost immediately I heard the strains of ' Down by the River' followed by 'Cowgirl in the sand', both taken from the his 1969 album 'Everybody knows this is nowhere' – stop showing off and get on with the story.

Both tracks are long, 19 minutes and 22 seconds in total – you are showing off again - and helped me through the entire session.

"Oh; I like Neil Young", exclaimed Maxine, the trainee nurse.

Subsequent background music was varied, although I do think including tracks from 'The Ruttles', that well-known Beatles send-up band, was a bit insensitive, particularly when they changed the titles of some of their songs - eg. 'Let it pee' and 'While my catheter gently weeps.'

Shortly before your treatment finishes you have a consultation with an after-care expert who explains what are likely to be the side effects of the treatment. She also tells you what you can and cannot eat and drink and then gives you a call a couple of weeks later to see how you are coping – all very thoughtful and welcome.

I did not lose my hair – much to the disappointment of Alex Forbes – and my sincere thanks to all OWs who have supported me throughout and who continue to ask me how I am – very thoughtful and it does help so much.

But the real heroes and heroines in all of this are the NHS staff, who were all so wonderful and to whom I, and so many others, owe a deep debt of gratitude.

I ***still*** have the poster, previously mentioned in this column, proclaiming:
"This home supports a pay rise for NHS heroes", to which I have added "Albeit more than 1%." in the front window of my Flat.

It takes a special person to work for the NHS and I have been privileged to meet a large number of them over the past 18 months. ***Thank you all so much.***