

A new experience

On 30 June 2014 I suffered a slight stroke. It was a real stroke, not a TIA; its effects on me were real but slight – chiefly weakness in the right arm and leg.

Over the next few days I made considerable progress thanks to the help and support (literally) of nursing staff and therapists. Initially I had the support of two nurses for every trip to the toilet. Within four days it was one helper and a walking stick. After the first weekend it was a stick alone, and I did manage it without any help at all on one or two occasions.

On 8 August I was shipped off to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. The stroke consultant had decided that I was a suitable candidate for a relatively new surgical procedure to remove plaque from an artery. The standard alternative would have been a stent, a device inserted into the artery to force its walls apart a little. This procedure is effective, in that it improves the blood flow, but it does not remove the plaque which is then free to circulate. In the new procedure the surgeon opens the artery and cleans it out, removing the plaque. This implies clamping the artery. During the procedure the patient remains conscious so that by simple question-and-answer the surgical team can be confident that blood flow to the brain is continuous via other arteries. The procedure took nearly five hours, during which I could hear the conversation between the two brilliant surgeons. It was an illuminating experience, though I found it a bit claustrophobic towards the end. I was left with a four-inch wound in the left side of my neck, closed up initially with a row of staples, which presented a rather sinister appearance.

Two days later I was home and under the care of an Early Discharge team – a nurse, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. On the Wednesday after my discharge, exactly a week after surgery, a District Nurse removed the staples, giving me a much less forbidding aspect. Since then progress has been steady but rather less spectacular than during the first week.

It was very illuminating to experience hospital as an in-patient having been a frequent visitor as Minister. I am filled with gratitude and admiration for the nursing staff who work their socks off dealing with multiple agendas: regular schedules (especially early in the morning); patients requiring attention; working as necessary with the clinical staff; maintaining records as required, careful always to avoid getting under the feet of their colleagues. The surgical team at JR left an enduring impression of friendly professionalism. I am so grateful to them for putting up with my questions for so long!

So many cards and messages of concern and good wishes. This was something I had never experienced before, and it too was remarkable. What effect was all that prayer supposed to have? And how? Well I'm no nearer answering the 'how' question than I could have been before, but the 'what' question is relatively easy. From start to finish I felt totally at peace and free from anxiety, as if (to borrow a phrase from the flight deck of a civil aircraft) the circuit

breakers had been pulled on all my worry circuits, disabling them completely. I am truly grateful to everyone who gave me that particular kind of support.