



The Royal National Hospital: a patient's story – part two



June Farnworth was admitted to the Hospital in February 1949, aged 20, direct from Guy's Hospital in London where, for some seven months, she had been under treatment for TB on an ordinary medical ward. Here we pick up her story from last week's issue. The thing that most struck June about the RNH was how few nurses were found working there. Moreover, most seemed themselves to have had TB at some time. On Ward B, June could recall only three: Sister Ashby, a bright little lady of about 40; an elderly nurse they all called 'Smithy' who had poor sight; and an SRN (unnamed) who had completed TB training at the RNH. What actually kept the wheels of the place turning was a veritable army of 'displaced' persons, refugees from mid-European countries who had been forced out after the re-drawing of political boundaries at the end of the World War Two, notably following the defeat and collapse of the German Third Reich. June remembered two by name: Maria, who she imagined was from Poland or Hungary and wore her hair in plaits coiled round her head; and Annalisa, a quietly spoken fair-haired young girl whose native language was German. These two, and many others, performed the task of ward orderlies: they did all the cleaning, brought round meals and collected dirty dishes, for instance. In most cases, their command of English was poor and when asked to do things, the common response was 'no understand'.

When June arrived at the RNH, it was the depths of winter and it was dark by 5 pm. The Hospital generated its own electricity but the lighting was very dim and reading or other close work was near impossible. All you could do was talk to your room-mate or listen on headphones to the Hospital radio. A favourite programme was Donald Peers between 9 and 9.30 pm. From all along the balcony, you could soon hear the laughter of young people, with some trying to sing along, but this was often followed by fits of coughing as voices broke down. With no heating in the bedrooms and the French doors always wide open, night as well as day, June recalled patients having seven blankets on their beds at night, plus a hot-water bottle that was regularly replenished. By day, they sat up in bed wearing thick jumpers over nightdresses and sometimes mittens for cold hands.

Treatment at the RNH was arranged in a series of 'Grades'. The lowest meant you largely spent all day in bed. The next grade had you up and dressed for two hours, sitting out on the balcony. Successive grades had you up and about for steadily longer periods. After some months, June began progressing through these grades, later moving to one of the convalescent blocks and, rather sadly, having to leave her old room-mate, Jean, behind. By July 1949, after having been hospitalised with TB for 13 months in total, she was deemed well enough for discharge, her mum and dad coming down to the Island by car to fetch her home. Happily, she never looked to back.