

body&soulhealth

Tea and empathy

For Kat Brown, volunteering on a cancer ward meant bringing a sense of normality to patients

On Wednesday evenings this time last year, you'd probably catch me returning to my boss, magazine in one hand and umpteenth cup of tea in the other. Secretary? Not quite. The tea was in a paper cup and my boss, for those 15 minutes at least, was a patient at Guy's Hospital in London, where, for nine months, I volunteered on a cancer unit.

In America they are nicknamed candy strippers but if Britain's hospital volunteers have a lower profile, they are no less valuable. Tomorrow, Guy's acknowledges the vital importance of offering patients non-medical care when it unveils a new £3.9 million, patient-designed cancer day unit. As well as volunteers on the wards, there will be support from Breast Cancer Care's volunteer-led HeadStrong initiative, which gives patients who have lost hair during their treatment the chance to try on hats, headscarves and hairpieces in private.

Majid Kazmid, clinical director of cancer services at Guy's, says that this extra care is crucial: "Volunteers are highly valued by patients and staff. They add the personal touch."

That was why I got involved at Guy's in July 2009. My aunt, Tina, had died from cancer the previous October and my friend Ben died in February 2009, just months after his diagnosis. He was only 28. I had taken part in Cancer Research's Race for Life but I wanted to do something more interactive, and through Twitter I found a recruitment ad for cancer programme volunteers at Guy's.

Once the hospital co-ordinators had vetted me, I had two days of training, covering such topics as knowledge of treatments and the financial aid available to patients. The same reasons for volunteering came up repeatedly: fulfilment; giving something back.

For medical students it is also invaluable work experience. Ayid Haider, 22, is a graduate who plans to be an oncological specialist. A Guy's volunteer for three years, he has just started working on the cancer day unit. "Volunteering gives me more than the medical side," he says. "Helping patients to get back to how their life was before the diagnosis means more to them than being treated."

One of our teachers, Sue, a



former Guy's patient in remission from breast cancer, described finding out that the cancer had returned on her birthday. She had taken a photograph of the expression on her face — and wanted to prevent others from ever having the same look.

I had been worried that I wouldn't be able to volunteer because my job as an online journalist ruled me out of day shifts. Instead I signed up for two hours every

Wednesday evening, and soon I was serving supper on Hedley Atkins, a palliative in-patient unit split into two wards of 12 men and 12 women. I was incredibly nervous — not of the patients, but of being useless.

"The most important thing is to make sure you focus on the person, not the illness," says Valerie Amos, 50, a HeadStrong volunteer and executive coach who has survived breast cancer. Attiya Khan, 22, did her first shift at the old, much smaller cancer day unit at Guy's a year ago. "I was a bit scared about saying the wrong thing or being in the way," she says, "but it wasn't like that at all. Everyone was really nice."

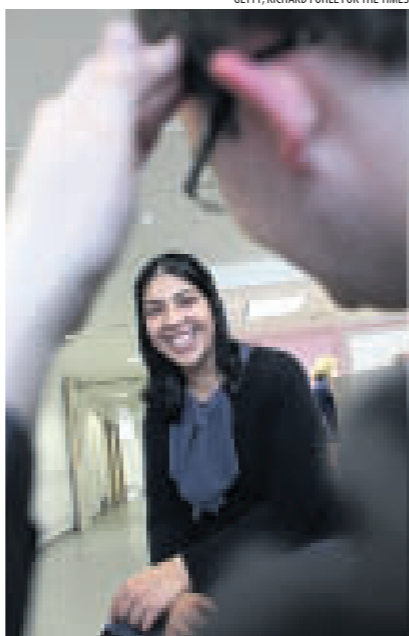
My nerves disappeared as soon as I walked into the unit. I was handed a dinner tray, disposable gloves and apron and started meeting people. I learnt a lot, and fast.

Patients were scared, bored, chatty, frequently asleep. Nail-painting was out of the question: chemo left nails impossibly dry, and sharing nail-files between patients was a definite hygiene no-no. On the bright side, a cup of tea to a patient and their tired visitors was as effective as a new battery, so I provided a waitress service.

Some patients loved to talk about their families, their lives. One man was quiet for weeks, then kept me enthralled about his career as a newspaper sub-editor. A 75-year-old woman regaled me with stories about 1940s childbirth, coronation parties and her family's nine sets of twins. "I've had a lovely life," she said. "It's been sad, mad and troublesome."

Another woman was resigned to her daughter's well-intentioned threat to bring her whole family over for Christmas. "I just want to relax and have a bit of quiet time," she said. "But I can't tell her that."

I discovered a Catholic patron saint of cancer, St Peregrine, when a terrified patient asked me to read her prayer



Good listeners: Guy's cancer day centre volunteers Attiya Khan, above, and Valerie Amos, below left

cards for her. A woman called Comfort banned me from naming my children likewise, saying: "No! You must pick good Christian names, like Hannah."

Above all, I listened: all the volunteers I spoke to agree that empathy is paramount. Margaret Boutell, 67, a carer and retired nursery nurse, volunteers at St Michael's Hospice in Hastings, where her adopted daughter Natalie died in 2008. "The love and care I saw for my daughter, I see every time I go into the hospice," she says. "I'm treated with great respect and kindness."

Like Margaret, I used every resource I had. Cleaning skills from old Saturday jobs came flooding back: keeping the kitchen tidy was a must. I put chocolates in the staff room for the unflappable, sweet-toothed nurses. I made tea, hot chocolate and Ovaltine, and kept my snack trolley well-ordered. At work, the showbiz desk put aside magazines for me to take in; I read *Hello!* to a woman with failing eyesight and an addiction to royal gossip. The magazines were a great success but occasionally I could have kicked myself for not checking the contents first. One woman tearfully asked me to take her copy away — she was unable to have children and a story about conception problems was too much.

Invariably, some people wouldn't be there when I came the following week. Sometimes they had gone home, sometimes to a hospice. And yes, sometimes they died. Visitors' faces lit up when they found out that I was there not as a doctor or nurse — but just to be with them. Maybe it made being on a cancer ward feel more normal.

I can't tell you what a boost it was to be able to bring patients some sense of normality, whether through tea, magazines or having a chat. "Recently a little old lady started laughing and I joined in," says Margaret. "She said, 'You laugh, love. I've laughed all my life. People are afraid to laugh now in case it offends me.'"

Watch interviews with volunteers at thetimes.co.uk/life

If you missed our 20-page Living with Cancer supplement last week, go to thetimes.co.uk/cancer

Getting in touch

■ **Guy's Hospital is recruiting volunteers. Call voluntary services on 020-7188 1658**

■ **St Michael's Hospice in Hastings is recruiting volunteers: stmichaelsospice.org**

■ **HeadStrong recruits volunteers at various times of the year. breastcancercare.org.uk**

■ **Race For Life: for more information and to sign up, visit raceforlife.org or call 0871 641111**

“The most important thing is to focus on the person and not the illness

Bone boosters

Amanda Ursell



Q I'm 35 years old and wonder if it is too late for me to do anything to improve my bones. I've heard that bone strength is largely down to diet in teenage years.

A It is true that bone density, or bone strength, appears to be determined by the time you reach 20. The process of depositing extra calcium on your bones' protein framework starts when you're about 9 and ends in your late teens.

But what you eat now can help you to hang on to what you have accrued. This is because bone is a living tissue — its protein "superstructure" and vital minerals, such as calcium, are constantly being replenished by what you eat and drink.

Maintaining good calcium intakes is crucial to make sure that your bones are as healthy as possible. Milk is a primary source. A regular 300ml latte, for instance, gives you more than half your 700mg daily target.

Soy and oat milks with added calcium, as well as foods such as sesame seeds, cashew nuts and almonds, also boost your intake. But good bone health does not end here. You need vitamin D, which is found in oily fish and, in smaller amounts, in eggs, butter and whole milk, so that calcium can cross your intestinal wall. It is then available for your blood to carry to your bones.

There is no UK recommended intake for vitamin D from dietary sources as it is assumed that we all get 20 minutes of sun on our skin each day in summer, which is enough to convert the pre-vitamin D under our skin into active vitamin D.

But if you're over 50, or pregnant or breastfeeding, it is recommended that you have 10 micrograms of vitamin D a day. As many women are now having children in their 30s — and pollutants mean that if you are pregnant you should limit your oily fish to one serving a week — it may not be a bad idea to consider a supplement.

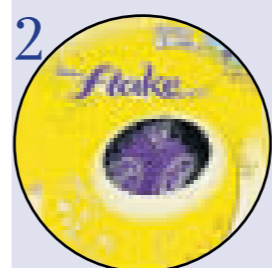
Vitamin K and the trace mineral silica are less well-known but also important nutrients for helping to keep bones in good shape. Both help to strengthen the protein superstructure on to which minerals are deposited. Green vegetables (the greener the

Pecking order Easter eggs

Do not despair: you can have an Easter egg without ruining your waistline. Just choose a smaller version without any extras.



1 Thomas & Friends Milk Chocolate Egg
262 calories, 14.3g fat
One of the smallest eggs on the market, it has no added extras — which means that you get just 50g of chocolate in the egg shell. Kinnerton, the maker, also promises that it is nut-free. Good for children and weight-conscious adults.



2 Cadbury's Flake Egg with three Flakes
830 calories, 47g fat
If you can stick with eating half the shell and one of the Flakes, you can get away with a 340-calorie Easter Day treat. Scoff the lot and you'll have tucked away almost half the daily calorie needs of a woman.



3 Maltesers Egg with three bags of Maltesers
820 calories, 44g fat
A medium-sized egg which, if you can cope with giving away the packets of Maltesers (or saving them for another day), will bring in your calorie count at 526 — the same as a typical 100g bar of milk chocolate.



4 Mars Egg with Mars, Snickers and Twix bars
1750 calories, 93g fat
Polish off the 200g shell, plus the three bars, and, if you're a woman, you'll have consumed your day's calories — with 20g more fat than you need. If you're a man, you'll have room for a 750-calorie meal (fat-free, of course).



5 Celebrations Egg with chocolates
2,060 calories, 114g fat
Although this is the largest of our chosen eggs, many are even bigger. The moral of the Easter egg purchase is: if you buy big 200g eggs with extras, you need to share them — or make them last. If you don't, your cholesterol and weight could soar.

“What you eat now can help you to hang on to your bone strength

leaves, the better) provide vitamin K. Spinach and broccoli are particularly good, as are dark green lettuce leaves. Vegetable oils contain vitamin K, but hydrogenation, the hardening process that turns oils into margarine and cooking fats, appears to rob them of their bone-strengthening properties. Manufacturers are removing these fats from their products, but they remain in many fast foods. Check for salt too; studies suggest that high-salt diets increase calcium losses. Silica, meanwhile, comes from porridge, French beans and melon, and from mineral waters such as Fiji and San Pellegrino. If you have a nutrition question, e-mail amanda.ursell@thetimes.co.uk

body&soulhealth and nutrition

AN APPLE A DAY

Emma Woolf



Another week, another milestone. For the first time in years, I managed to eat a shop-bought sandwich. For me, there's something threatening about ready-made sandwiches: who knows what nasties (fat, salt, cheese) may lurk inside? Once again it was T who coerced me into it. I let it slip that I'd once eaten a "Bugsy" and enjoyed it, and he set about finding one.

Bugsy? Let me explain. Wholemeal bread, crunchy grated carrot, hoummos. It ticks all my orthorexic boxes: simple, fresh and healthy. We sat in Richmond Park. And yes, I ate the entire thing. T smiled at me. "Bugsy, as in Bugs Bunny, right? You eating that is the best thing that's happened all week," he said. "It makes me so happy, so relieved."

Afterwards I felt full — an unaccustomed, uncomfortable sensation for me. But my body also felt nourished. T said watching me eat a whole sandwich was like watering a parched plant.

These past few months have been up and down. I veer between excitement and fear, knowing that I'm making real progress in the battle against anorexia and terrified I'll get fat. I've had migraines so bad that I can barely stand up for days. But the prize — having a baby — is worth all the anxiety. I'm going to keep eating. I'm going to hold my nerve.

The day after the Bugsy triumph, I cycle over to see my parents. I tell my mother I'm doing well, eating more. "You don't look like you've put on weight," she says. My mother is slim and beautiful — in terms of body image and control, she understands me. She knows I need this reassurance (there's nothing more frightening for an anorexic than the words "you're looking well!"). "You know what I think?" she adds. "The quicker you gain the weight, the less painful it will be."

You know what they say about mothers: they're always right.

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