

Health & Fitness

With seven days to go before entries close, one of our writers nominates a medical team fighting to save premature babies



My heroes: I just don't know how they do it

by Allison Pearson

IT IS pain not pleasure that usually takes us to hospital, but five years ago I was invited to spend a week as an observer at the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel. I was meant to be writing about what a godawful mess the NHS was in, but try remaining gloomy and cynical when you are watching a surgeon rebuild the face of a man disfigured by cancer just so that patient can walk down the street with dignity and without shame. Or see the nurse bending to croon a song to the six-month-old boy, no bigger than a shoe, who is being kept alive by a combination of the latest technology and the oldest medicine in the world — tender, loving care.

My memories of those few days at the Royal London are among the most vivid of my life. Entering the hushed neo-natal intensive-care unit was like going into a museum: there were six or seven Perspex cases, containing anguished sketches towards humanity.

Christopher, a nurse who looked as though he was a teenager, explained to me that some of the babies liked to be stroked on their forehead, others behind ears no bigger than a 10p coin. "Very premature ones don't like being touched at all, but if you just hold your hand next to their face it seems to calm them."

I remember how I wanted to cry when he said that, and how I thought of my own two babies who had come into the world roaring with life across the city, attended by the lovely midwives of University College Hospital. And I remember Steve Kempsey, the shambling teddy-bear of a consultant, who did his fierce best to save two-thirds of the babies born at 24 weeks — twice the national average.

I pointed out that the Royal London was in the poorest part of London, desperately pushed for staff and short of the latest kit.

"Yes," agreed the doctor cheerfully, "but I like working with these patients. I find they are able to maintain a positive attitude much more than adults are able to."

It costs just over £800 a day to look after a baby in intensive care. The economics don't bear thinking about. But that's just it; at the London, they don't think about the money, they think about the babies. A hundred lives saved every year.

And I remember the teeming accident-and-emergency department, where staff keep going on adrenaline and black humour ("It used to be that they had a headache, now they've got meningitis cos they saw it on bloody Casualty.") And I remember the maternity unit, with four baby Mohameds for every Ben, where midwife Dee Wheeler explained the need for interpreters: "There is no Bengali word for breast. We have to say chest milk instead of breast-feeding."

It was at the London Hospital that Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, was offered sanctuary by surgeon Frederick Treves. I thought about that fierce, tactful compassion when I met consultant Ian Hutchinson. He removes cancers of the face and neck and then spends long hours reconstructing the appearance of those patients — even of those who are going to die quite soon. "Our aim," he said, "is to make them feel they can reintegrate into society and to spare them the indignity

'At the London, they don't think about the money, just the babies. A hundred lives saved every year'



Born lucky: Allison Pearson with her children, Evie, seven, and Thomas, three, both safely delivered at UCH

of having a dirty great hole in their neck."

When we think about the NHS, it is easy to dwell on decline and deterioration. Yet, once, tumours would have sprouted out of patients' flesh like stinking cauliflowers and they would have been sent home to die with a bag over their head. Ian Hutchinson and his team are not just improving the quality of life, they are doing something even more civilised: improving the quality of dying.

OUR country doesn't have a written constitution or a stirring declaration of independence. What it does have is the words contained in a White Paper published two years before Aneurin Bevan declared the National Health Service open in 1948: "Everybody, irrespective of means, age, sex or occupation, shall have equal opportunity to benefit from the best and most up-to-date medical and allied services available."

I saw that promise in action 50 years later. I saw exhausted men and women whose daily lives are a working definition of grace under pressure. So my NHS Champions are the staff of the Royal London Hospital, and, most particularly, the doctors and nurses on neo-natal intensive care. In their efforts to coax the tiniest mortals towards life, it's hard not to see an index of what it means to be human.

To vote for your NHS champion log on to www.thisislondon.co.uk