



Writer and former Conservative member of the European Parliament, Stanley Johnson is full of praise for his treatment in a London hospital

Three cheers FOR THE NHS

I began to feel ill during Nick Herbert's speech on waste management. Nick is Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment. He was addressing a meeting organised by Policy Exchange, the right-of-centre think tank. He made a number of good points, but with my stomach ache growing more acute by the moment this was not the best time to concentrate on the merits of Combined Heat and Power generation (CHP).

I went home and tried to stick it out for a few hours. A week or so previously I had heard an item on Radio 4's *Today* programme about how swearing could help in the fight against pain, so I gave it a go. But by around 7pm Jenny, my wife, had had enough. She said she was going to ring the doctor.

Dr Jamal Karwan, a personable young man originally from northern Iraq, was highly professional. I wanted a painkiller, fast, but he wasn't going to dish it out without asking me some questions first. When he finally gave me a jab of whatever it was, the edge came off the pain. After a while he left, taking blood and urine samples with him.

Around 11pm, the doctor telephoned to say we should call an ambulance. The results of the blood test had just come in. My amylase levels were 2400. High amylase readings can apparently denote severe inflammation of an internal organ. A normal reading would be around 100.

"He says it could be acute pancreatitis," Jenny said, putting the phone down.

She was very cool, calm and collected. Her former husband had died of complications arising from pancreatitis. That was before she met me. I think she was mentally preparing herself.

The ambulance arrived within 15 minutes. I am sure they would have carried



Picture of health – Stanley Johnson enjoys a day out on Exmoor with Harry

me downstairs if they had had to, but apart from the now rapidly returning pain, I was still mobile. Ten minutes later I was being whisked up to the sixth floor of University College Hospital on Euston Road.

From a professional point of view, the people who looked after me last week were the bee's knees. The mention of pancreatitis

Registrar, conferred. Then Cynthia sweetly drew a diagram for me. Cynthia comes from Malta but her English is perfect: "Here is the liver, here is the pancreas, here is the duodenal tract. If you have a blockage at the bottom of the tract, you may create pressure on the liver, causing jaundice. At the same time, the blockage may cause an

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had set my alarm bells ringing. There was the long-term prospect of death and discomfort. More immediately, "lifestyle changes" threatened. I do not regard myself as a heavy drinker. My answer to the question: "how many units do you drink a day?" is usually "er ... um ..." I take comfort from the fact that Winston Churchill opened the first bottle of champagne before breakfast.

What was so encouraging as far as I was concerned was that the consultant in charge, a young, tall, good-looking Sicilian called Marco Adamo, clearly was not going to be rushed into making a politically-correct diagnosis. "Let us look at all the facts first," he said.

Mr Adamo was right.

That first rather hectic night, a battery of tests revealed that besides rapidly falling blood pressure, I was also suffering from jaundice. Next morning, when I had a chance to look in the mirror, I saw a gaunt yellow face staring back at me.

I have never thought of myself as "gaunt" before, so this was quite a shock. Adamo and Cynthia-Michelle Borg, Specialist

inflammation of the pancreas."

The next step was the CT scan. You lie on your back with your arms above your head and are fed into a machine while an electronic voice warns that you may feel very hot or experience other strange sensations.

A few hours later the results came through. Adamo was clearly pleased. The scan showed a swelling at the end of the duodenum, as though a (relatively) large object had recently passed that way.

From then on it was plain sailing. Of course there are minor physical inconveniences. If you are attached to a catheter, IV drips and, occasionally, oxygen, your movements tend to be restricted. And "Nil by Mouth" – my regime for three full days – meant just that. But the pay-off from that early and accurate diagnosis of gallstones was immense.

At 3pm on my third day I was wheeled downstairs for an ERCP (Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangio-Pancreatography) examination, conducted by the consultant in charge, Mr Adrian Hatfield. Tall and silver-haired, Hatfield looked every inch



Consultant Marco Adamo

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



the part. “With the ERCP we see what’s happening inside. We can also clear away any debris and enlarge the pathway in case you pass more stones in the future.”

Mr Hatfield obviously knew what he was doing. Back in the ward that night, still woozy from the sedation, I received word that the mission had been accomplished. Obstacles had been removed,

“Apart from the sheer professional competence of the people who looked after me, there was this tremendous sense of team spirit, of shared endeavour”

pathways made straight. Sometime soon, I should have to have the gall-bladder removed. But for now there was no reason why, after any necessary checks, I should not go home.

As you get older, it probably takes longer to bounce back. For a couple of days after returning home I found myself, untypically, in reflective mode. My thoughts centred in particular on the NHS.

Although I admire the talent and outspokenness of MEP Daniel Hannan, I found myself disagreeing violently with his view, as expressed on American television a week or so after my visit to the emergency ward, that he “wouldn’t wish the NHS on anyone”.

I had four days (and nights) in hospital

and I found it an exhilarating and, yes, uplifting time.

Apart from the sheer professional competence of the people who looked after me, there was this tremendous sense of team spirit, of shared endeavour. There was Anuj, a doctor from India, who also published poetry, in Hindi as well as in English; Claudio, who, like Mr Adamo,

came from Italy; my night nurse, Kehinde, was from Nigeria; my day nurse, Lilyanne, also came from Nigeria, as did her colleague, Alex (studying law in his spare time); Nadira came from Trinidad, Maria from Spain. Michelle, the Deputy Sister, brilliantly arranged my accommodation so that I had a view of St Paul’s and the London Eye. Annalise, Graeme and Sally also ensured that the UK was not unrepresented in this panoply of nations.

The night before I was discharged, I had a few minutes’ quiet chat with Mr Adamo. Apart from his hierarchical responsibilities with UCH, Adamo’s specialty is laparoscopic surgery. He helps overweight men and women lose weight. “I can save more lives through laparoscopic surgery than

from cancer surgery,” he told me.

“On the NHS?” I asked him. “Just like I have been this week?”

“Yes.” This would have been the moment for Adamo to have embarked upon some stinging critique. Instead he added thoughtfully: “The NHS is running at its limits, but it is running very well. Of course, that depends on the hospital.”

I am sure I struck it lucky with UCH. But I am also ready to believe that, contrary to popular report, there are many such facilities up and down the country, working to immensely high standards.

On the basis of my experience, I can’t help feeling enormously cheered. It is certainly reassuring to know that whatever cuts in public spending an incoming government may be forced to introduce, both the main political parties seem determined to ring-fence the NHS.

■ **Editor’s note:** My father’s gall-bladder was successfully removed last month by Mr Adamo and he is currently on safari in the Serengeti.

■ Stanley Johnson’s memoir, *Stanley I Presume*, is published by Fourth Estate, price £18.99.

■ Stanley Johnson will be one of our panel of guest speakers at *The Lady Literary Lunch* on 26 October.