



Rachel Stroud

THERE AREN'T MANY places on earth less comfortable than doctors' waiting rooms.

Actually, there probably are. The edge of any fairly sizeable cliff and/or the living room of Goran Nilsson (the man responsible for introducing the IKEA phenomenon to the U.K.) would probably constitute two fairly good examples, but even allowing for this, doctors' waiting rooms are right up there. I'm not talking necessarily about the quality of furniture provided by the NHS - the chairs in my local surgery seem to be fairly well-designed - but about the general unease that you can't help but notice, and be affected by, as soon as you walk into one.

You know the drill. You walk in, give your name and appointment time to a frazzle-haired and dragon-like receptionist. Once you've managed to survive her flaming breath unscathed, you are faced with a new challenge. You dare not disobey her order to "take a seat", but the problem is that she didn't tell you which one it was safe to take. Despite the higher-than-average concentration of trained health professionals in your immediate vicinity, you are expected to work out for yourself not only which patient sounds and/or looks to be the carrier of the most horrible and contagious illness, but also to appraise with lightning speed and accuracy what exactly constitutes a 'safe distance' from which the dreaded bacteria cannot reach you, and which at the same time does not give an impression of the sort of anti-social rudeness which might antagonize fellow patients made potentially volatile by more-than-usually-extended waiting times.

Following the successful negotiation of this dilemma, you can only flick through so many pages of the March 1976 issue of *Hello!* before you start to notice that everyone around you seems to be in a significantly worse state of health than you are, at which point you begin to seriously consider a bolt for the door as you realize that you are in fact nothing more than a hypochondriac fraud and that, once exposed as "wasting the doctor's time", you will be subject to the eternal wrath of that same terrifying receptionist.

If all that stress doesn't

give you a heart attack on the spot, one thing remains certain: you won't be a fraud for long. Even if you weren't ill when you went into the doctor's surgery, you will be by the time you leave.

What's more, according to the details of the latest in a long tradition of hyped-up health scares, encounters with other patients are not the only aspect of a visit to the doctor which could potentially result in the contraction of something nasty. Investigations by David Graham of the U.S.'s Food and Drug Administration have sparked concerns about the possible effects on patient health of a handful of drugs currently being prescribed as solutions to common ailments. Among these is Serevent, which is used in the treatment of asthma. According to Richard Irving in *The Times*, the drug "might increase the chances of death among acute sufferers." Prior to reading his article, I wasn't aware that human mortality was a matter of chance, or that the probability of any of us popping our clogs could be reduced from a fairly fixed 100 percent. Presumably the lesson we are meant to take from this is that you learn something every day and that if you don't take Serevent you'll stand a better chance of continuing to do so. For eternity.

Which brings me to what is currently a bone of contention in my house. All this taken into account, I can't really blame one of my housemates for her unwillingness to fill in the doctor's surgery registration form that, at the last count, had been sitting on her desk for eight weeks. I say this strictly off the record, and on the vital condition that you do not, under any circumstances, repeat my comments to another of my housemates, whose unswerving conviction in the importance of the matter leads her (with some justification) to harangue our Reluctant Patient at regular intervals about her apparent reticence toward the completion of the necessary paperwork.

In light of this situation, I think it best not to tell my doctor-shy friend about Mr. Graham's warnings. Until further evidence can be found to offer us a more concrete basis for concern, I think it's best to take such warnings with a pinch of salt.