

COVERAGE

Chris Colson

Part of

WRITING THE FUTURE

Writing the Future, the world's largest health short story prize, is brought to you by Kaleidoscope Health & Care.

Inspired by science fiction, entries considered how health and healthcare in the UK will look in the year 2100.

The prize was won by Elizabeth Ingram-Wallace with her story 'Opsnizing Dad', and was published along with the five other shortlisted stories in October 2017.

At a time of reflecting on where healthcare has been, a further set of longlisted stories was published in the summer of 2018 to coincide with the NHS's 70th birthday.

All of the published stories are available on the Kaleidoscope website, along with the option to buy a limited edition hard copy of the six shortlisted stories.

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**The future is...
everyone's
doing**

There was this awkward moment, sitting in the GP's waiting room on a comfy, old-school chintz chair, still ignoring why you were there. You pretended to read the latest gossip on your phone, but you didn't really care. The secretary nearby knew, of course, but he wouldn't tell. And there was no one else to talk to. Nobody would waste time in here when they always got an appointment. Williams himself had only spent the last five minutes here because he liked arriving early.

'Mr Williams?' the secretary said, right on time. 'Dr Jones will see you now.'

'Thank you.'

Williams followed him to the GP's office. Although it was fitted with such state-of-the-art equipment as an examination chair that performed all the basic tests in a non-invasive manner, and a long cupboard covered with other medical tools and bottles of drugs, its colour scheme was a warm blend of reds, ochres and yellows reminiscent of her Indian heritage. Williams had always found it reassuring and pleasant. Pride of place was held by a giant computer screen sitting on a cupboard next to Dr Jones's desk, so that they could both look at it while she was explaining what was happening to her patient.

'Ah, Mr Williams,' Dr Jones said as he entered. 'Good morning. Please sit down. Thank you for coming at short notice.'

‘Well, I got your notification while playing football with my mates this morning,’ Williams said as he sat down in the patient’s chair in front of her desk. ‘I don’t understand. Is there something wrong with my exoskeleton?’

He raised his arm in front of her as he spoke, displaying the thin ceramic shafts strapped to his hand and wrists, and continuing along his arm and his whole body. He had needed mechanical assistance for his joints ever since he had developed severe arthritis, and progressively graduated to a full-body exoskeleton that allowed him an unfettered life, even though he was now nearing eighty.

Dr Jones shook her head.

‘No, no, not at all,’ she said. ‘No, I got some concerning values from your chip.’

Williams looked embarrassed at that.

‘Oh... Well, listen, this chip is injected in my backside, and it, you know, itches. I mean, I know I shouldn’t scratch myself so much, but—’

‘Mr Williams, we went through this before,’ she said patiently. ‘This itch is psychological. It has no physical basis. You just don’t like the idea of something being injected inside you.’

‘Right,’ Williams said awkwardly.

‘What I meant were rather your blood chemical values.’

‘Oh.’

Now he felt a slight sense of foreboding at this unexpected piece of news.

‘Yes, well, I’d rather be straightforward,’ she went on. ‘That cancer you’ve been expecting all your life has finally materialized.’

Williams felt relieved.

‘Oh. Okay.’

‘To be precise, your DNA make-up led us to expect bowel cancer, but your blood values are inconclusive.’

‘Right,’ he said, shrugging. ‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Well, I think the most urgent thing to do right now is to send a nanomachine swarm into your system to study the tumour in situ.’

Williams scowled and Dr Jones smiled.

‘Yes, more stuff inside you,’ she nodded. ‘You won’t feel anything, don’t worry.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Williams grumbled. ‘The thing is, I’m of the old generation. I saw this *Body of State* movie when I was a kid. The villains miniaturize themselves to enter the body of the President of the United States and kill him unnoticed and the good guys follow suit. They end up fighting World War Three in there. The President was stuck on the toilet for three straight days.’

Dr Jones repressed a laugh.

‘Ah, old classics,’ she said instead. ‘They really knew how to get under your skin back then, didn’t they? I always find today’s works are bowdlerized.’

‘You might say so,’ Williams said.

‘Anyway, science has made some progress since then. You have nothing to worry about, even though, as you were born a little earlier than most of us (he smiled at the euphemism), all we could do until now was monitor your system and wait for the cancer to break out. Nowadays, of course, most people have been screened for genetic diseases as embryos, and the faulty genes edited out.’

‘No doubt it saves everyone a lot of trouble,’ Williams noted.

‘Oh, it does. Now, since your cancer is situated in the digestive tract, I’m going to give you this to swallow.’

She rose from her chair, took a small glass bottle on her desk, unscrewed it and gave it to him. He held it up to her desk lamp and stared curiously at it.

‘Can’t see anything,’ he remarked mischievously.

Dr Jones knew her patient well enough to know when he was kidding and smiled.

‘Of course you can’t, they’re invisible. This is distilled water containing the standard cancer test

pack. Each nanomachine is programmed to study a particular molecule and relay values over a period of time. Once we don't need them anymore we'll disable them and your body will digest them.'

Williams winced a little at this.

'Hey, you don't want to know how they cured this a century ago, *if* they cured it at all. This here is easy. There's a lot less pain and radioactivity involved.'

Williams positively grimaced at this.

'You have no reason to be afraid, I promise,' Dr Jones reassured him.

'I'm not afraid,' Williams said dignifiedly, 'I'm disgusted.'

'Good. Good. Now please drink this so we can obtain some precise diagnosis.'

Williams downed the bottle in some gulps.

'Thank you. Now, the swarm will need some time to reach its destination and yield results, so in the meanwhile we can talk about your insurance.'

Williams was intrigued.

'You've got my insurance file. I've got coverage for genetic illnesses.'

'Indeed you do,' Dr Jones nodded, 'but we need to look at the particulars of this case.'

'What particulars?'

'Your prevention parameters.'

‘What about them now?’ Williams asked, confused. ‘I know I’ve got faulty genes, I always did everything I could to minimize the risks!’

‘Yes, it’s all in your chip data. You always regularly exercised and you did every screening mandated by law, plus the ones required from your insurance.’

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘Well, how about your nutrition habits?’ she asked, her eyebrows raised.

‘My nutrition habits?’

‘Might I remind you that we monitor them as well? Your chip reports your eating of fried meat products every day—’

‘It’s called a full English breakfast,’ Williams said defensively.

‘You eat meat and sausage products almost every meal,’ Dr Jones said sternly. ‘I believe I have warned you for decades now that processed meat causes digestive tract cancer.’

‘Yes, you have,’ Williams said, sounding like a schoolboy version of himself.

‘And? Have you heeded my advice?’

This was a rhetorical question, and Williams dodged it.

‘Hey, I eat the same as everyone else in this country.’

‘I warned you for your own good, you know. You disregarded it, and now you see the result,’ Dr Jones reluctantly said. ‘I’m afraid this relaxing of your eating discipline is costing you now. Your eating habits demonstrate that you took avoidable risks. Therefore, we can’t offer you full coverage for your cancer.’

‘Oi!’ Williams protested. ‘I’m sorry, this isn’t right. You can’t ascribe my illness solely to my eating habits when it’s been scientifically proven that I’ve got faulty genes!’

‘You do have faulty genes indeed, but it doesn’t excuse you from not doing everything you can to prevent the onset of the cancer you know you are vulnerable to. I mean, look at your drinking. We know excessive amounts of alcohol cause bowel cancer, but in spite of your susceptibility, you never gave up the bottle.’

‘My drinking is normal,’ he protested.

‘You never have a dry day.’

‘It’s only beer.’

‘I believe your chip data shows otherwise.’

‘Okay, maybe a little wine or whisky every once in a while.’

Dr Jones raised her eyebrows.

‘You know, one of the reasons we implant patients with this chip is that most people are insincere when reporting what they eat and drink.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning that according to the chip, you drink wine every day and whisky every Saturday and Sunday.’

‘Okay, maybe I have ramped it up over the years, but it wasn’t always like that.’

‘I know. Your health data, right to when you were first implanted forty years ago, shows you drank a lot less back then. It only started to increase about twenty years ago.’

‘That’s when my mother started having health problems. I just reacted to it.’

‘I conducted an assessment of your mental health back then. I found no symptoms of depression.’

‘Depression? What do you mean?’

‘Well, I would understand your mother— (she tapped on her screen) getting a double hip replacement, is that right? (Williams nodded) Well, of course that would worry you, maybe depress you.’

‘I was not depressed. She was well cared for.’

‘What was the trouble then?’

‘Something you’re probably too young to experience,’ Williams said. ‘I felt melancholy because my mother was getting old and I could feel death coming closer. That’s something even you can’t cure.’

Dr Jones tactfully stayed silent.

‘So maybe, just maybe,’ Williams continued, ‘I started to appreciate life a little more, including fine alcohol shared with my football mates.’

‘There are other, healthier ways to appreciate life,’ Dr Jones pointed out.

‘Well according to you, I should live my whole life like a zen monk.’

‘Zen monks get full health coverage from us, and surprisingly few health problems.’

‘Not funny,’ Williams said, scowling.

‘Seriously,’ Dr Jones went on, ‘you know as well as I do that this is the social contract in this country. The scientific body of evidence is large enough that we have evolved guidelines on how to live a healthy life. Food and exercise are the most important factors of them all. We know exactly what to eat and not to eat, what to drink and not to drink. The state advertises this, so that the appropriate behaviour is now common knowledge. This is still a free country, so applying this advice is up to you, but the MPs who refounded the NHS fifty years ago considered that the people in their entirety should not bear the cost of the stupidity of some individuals. This is why they have implemented this into the system. You take risks, you pay.’

Williams nodded knowledgeably.

‘Yes, I know. You don’t seem to realize, but I was around when it happened. And do you know *why* it

happened? The medical profession just couldn't cope anymore. There were so many people to care for, and so few people to do the caring.'

'I know that, of course. An ageing population, high stress levels and bad nutrition causing depression, obesity, addictions, loss of sleep, an alcoholism epidemic, not to mention the privatisation of healthcare...'

'And don't forget the polio epidemics caused by those idiots who refused to vaccinate their kids,' he went further. 'I saw so many of them paralysed for their whole lives.'

'This is why we made them compulsory.'

'Yes, and a lot of good it did, but my point was, the situation was so bad that at some point, the entire healthy population would have been needed to properly care for the sick, the young and the elderly. It just wasn't possible anymore.'

Dr Jones nodded.

'So,' he continued, 'we made choices. Some would get better care than others, because we just couldn't care for all.'

'Yes,' Dr Jones said. 'And I seem to remember from my studies that we chose to reward people who were acting responsibly: those who ate sensibly, exercised regularly, and generally took good care of themselves according to science. Why, we almost

eradicated smoking in this country because smokers only get fifty percent coverage.'

'Oh yes, good incentive. And that's my point: it worked. It dramatically reduced the number of people needing care, so that today, everyone gets the care they need. Why go on penalising people then?' he asked forcefully.

Dr Jones looked at him as though he was a complete fool.

'Why?' she asked sarcastically. 'Oh, you think that's it, don't you? You think we've won, and the system will stay like it is now forever. Well, wrong. It's in a perpetual state of imbalance, and we are here to help maintain the balance, because it benefits us all. And yet it's fragile and easily abused, the way you are doing right now.'

'I'm not *abusing* it—' he protested.

She gave him a 'you're-not-fooling-me' look, which shut him up.

'The system we had before gave better care to the rich. It didn't work. The poor—the majority of the population—were left vulnerable and suffering; a situation that was intolerable, because we doctors are in the business of relieving suffering. So we decided to empower people instead, put them in charge of their own health. It works much better. For example, do you like your exoskeleton?'

‘Of course,’ he said, a little surprised.

‘No more complains about the ceramic joints?’

‘Not at all,’ he answered, still not seeing where she was going. ‘They work better than the old hydraulic joints my mother had.’

‘I believe your mother had one of the very first exoskeleton models intended for the general public?’

‘Yes, she did. Did wonders for her mobility as well. She could stay active almost until her death.’

‘Yes, it was a significant advance,’ Dr Jones said. ‘Otherwise someone else would have had to care for her, putting an unnecessary strain on your family.’

He finally understood what she meant.

‘Indeed. I don’t know how I could have made it alone.’

‘I believe you have a sister? She’s a client in this practise as well, if I remember correctly.’

‘My sister is a business lawyer. She and her associates have an office in London. She wouldn’t have had the time to care for our mother, so it would have fallen down to me.’

‘See? This is what I mean. Our system allows people to live longer and healthier without support, so that the carers can concentrate on the people who actually need them, without being overwhelmed themselves. Of course, technology helps a great deal in that respect.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he quipped. ‘So much technology, and all I get is a chip in my buttock.’

Dr Jones allowed herself a smile.

‘You think being healthy is a personal thing, and you play with your health thinking that you can always rely on us in case there’s a problem. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work like that. Taking care of your health is part of living in a society. Your sickness is a burden borne by all of us. This is why we do our best to keep you as healthy as possible.’

Williams felt humbled now.

‘Okay, okay, you win, I’m sorry.’

‘That was not my intent. I want you to feel committed, hence the financial incentive.’

‘All right,’ Williams said, raising his hands in surrender. ‘What’s my sentence?’

She turned to her computer.

‘Well, you’ve got full coverage for your faulty genes as part of your package, and you’ve fulfilled your exercising and screening requirements. Only the nutrition is lacking, so the net result is minus ten percent for the unhealthy food and minus ten percent for the high alcohol intake.’

This moment her giant screen beeped, indicating that it had gathered all the information it needed from the nanomachine swarm inside his body, and processed the data to a meaningful conclusion.

Dr Jones tapped the screen for the result, and they both watched the computer generate a simulation of his digestive tract and zeroing in on the tiny clump of cancer cells in his pancreas.

Williams took this in and laughed delightedly.

‘Okay,’ Dr Jones said, looking slightly nonplussed. ‘So you don’t have bowel cancer.’

‘No, I don’t,’ he smiled. ‘And by the way, I did listen to this health advice you gave me all these years. In fact, you’ve done it so often I know it by heart, and I don’t seem to remember that alcohol causes pancreatic cancer.’

‘Why, you’re right,’ she said, looking like she didn’t know whether to be proud of or annoyed by her patient.

‘So do I get these ten percent back?’ he asked mischievously.

‘Fair enough,’ she smiled.

‘Thank you,’ he said happily.

‘Hey, we’re not monsters either, you know. You get ninety percent coverage on this one, but if you cut down on those breakfast sausages, it can bounce back to one hundred as soon as your blood values return to normal.’

‘Nice.’

‘And you really do have an alcohol problem,’ she said firmly. ‘You still have fifteen to twenty years in front of you, you know. Don’t lose the chance to live them to the fullest.’

‘Sorry, but I think drinking is part of enjoying life,’ he said earnestly.

‘Well enjoy life with alcohol-free beer and keep the whisky for big celebrations, will you? Remember, if you do get bowel cancer...’

‘You’re right,’ he nodded. ‘I’ll try my best.’

‘If you need help with rehab, I’m here.’

‘I know. So what are you going to do about this?’ he asked, gesturing at the giant screen.

‘Well, this is a tiny tumour,’ Dr Jones said, examining it closely.

She tapped on the screen to highlight the treatment options.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I think we can kill those cancer cells with fullerenes.’

‘Fullerenes?’

‘Oh, you’re going to love this. Carbon molecules shaped like footballs.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding me!’ he exclaimed.

‘Absolutely not. Fullerenes activated by light-radiating nanomachines to trigger cell death. Won’t be a week.’

‘I get cured by football? Amazing!’

‘Isn’t all life like football? You cover your goal, we cover you. Team work. Here, drink this for me.’

He gulped another bottle of nanomachines, this time eagerly, and burst out laughing.

About the author

I have just finished writing my first full-length novel. Through my job as a librarian at the second-largest university in France, I work with all kinds of people from scientists to first-year students, and sometimes assume the role of a teacher to them. I have recently joined a English theater company established by the large number of British expatriates in my city. I enjoy staging murder parties, watching British television series and generally solving mysteries.

Inspiration

I love that healthcare is the embodiment of a great idea: that everyone shares the burden of everyone's health. Taking care of one's own body and mind as best one can is just reciprocating other people's commitment to this idea, and should be actively encouraged.