DOING THE ROUNDS

Another Christmas carol

Paul Worthington

Marley was dead, to begin with. There was no doubt whatsoever about that. Although Marley had not physically expired, his recent appointment as a professor of health policy was certainly death in NHS career terms, as far as his former assistant Edward Scrooge was concerned. Marley had left eight months ago, but Scrooge was still finding it hard to fill Marley's shoes as Trust Chief Executive. The pressures had not improved his ill disposed and miserable temperament.

It was Christmas Eve and Scrooge was busy in his small, poorly lit hospital office. It was almost 5 pm and snow was falling thickly in the darkness outside. Through his open door he could see his assistant, Roberta Cratchett, hunched over a small desk in the cold waiting room which served as her office.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. Roberta came into Scrooge's office. He didn't look up, but grunted, "I suppose you'll want me to do on call all day tomorrow!"

"If it's quite convenient, Mr Scrooge," she replied. "After all, it is Christmas Day."

"It's not convenient," he responded, "and it's not fair. Christmas, pah! A poor excuse for disturbing a well established on call rota once every year."

Every year Roberta went through this, in spite of the extra hours and on calls she worked, including Scrooge's, and despite the fact that Scrooge never

celebrated Christmas and would be working at home. It was one of the few days her family could be together, so after Scrooge had grudgingly accepted the on call bleep, Roberta was swiftly on her way home.

A few minutes later Scrooge was disturbed again, this time by Mark Charter, the large, cheerful Director of Quality. "Thought you'd still be here, Scrooge. We're off to the hospital social club for a drink. Would you like to join us in a bit of a Yuletide spirit?" Loud laughter came from the corridor beyond.

Scrooge scowled, "Christmas! Balderdash. I don't hold with that goodwill to all men nonsense, as you well know. I've too much paperwork for such frivolity. Reports to read, budget sheets to scrutinise. It's a poor thing when a manager neglects his business to go out talking to people and celebrating things."

"Oh Scrooge, you're such a humbug," the director replied, beaming broadly, and he left to join his colleagues, loudly whistling "Jingle Bells."

The darkness was thick as Scrooge ate a melancholy and frugal supper from the vending machine in the canteen and drove back to his cramped, gloomy flat. It was 11 pm before he was settled before the feeble fire, drinking a cup of weak, lukewarm tea. Suddenly a cold wind rushed through the room and out of the darkness a misty figure began to emerge. Scrooge rubbed his eyes and blinked furiously. "Indigestion—it's that canteen food," he thought, "never did like cook-chill," and made a mental note to give the catering manager a dressing down.

To his fright, though, the figure came closer. "Who's that?" No answer. Then the light flickered across the figure's face. Scrooge shuddered and gasped in recognition.

"In a previous life I was Duncan Marley, your chief executive," the figure said, advancing. It wore a grey suit and was wrapped in a length of thick chains. Words were stamped on the chains, and all of these were bound together by an enormous padlock on which was inscribed NHS Priorities.

"See my chains, Scrooge," Marley said "I wear the bonds that were forged for me in life."

"You were always a good NHS manager, Marley," Scrooge wailed.

"But I neglected people, Scrooge. I spent my life behind my office door. I did not communicate effectively. With doctors, nurses, other staff, or..." he breathed heavily, "our customers. Your chain is already twice as long, and growing daily."

"But what can I do, Marley? With so many priorities," Scrooge pleaded.

"You will be visited by three spirits: the Ghosts of NHS Past, Present, and Future. Expect the first when the on call bleep sounds at 1 am and the others when you are bleeped a second and a third time." Marley was fading: "My time here now is done. Farewell, Scrooge." With that, he disappeared and Scrooge was plunged into a deep sleep.

Sure enough, he was awakened rudely by the bleep, and the door of his room was flung open. There stood a

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tall, formidable woman in solid shoes and a dark blue matron's uniform topped by a crisp white nurse's cap. She walked briskly towards Scrooge and said in a firm, authoritative voice, "Mr Scrooge? I am the Ghost of NHS Past—please follow me."

They went down into the streets. Scrooge followed in the ghost's confident footsteps to a doorway in a squat stone building, whose windows burned brightly with friendly lights.

"I recognise this," said Scrooge excitedly. "This is the cottage hospital where I first worked as a hospital secretary. Happy days." They walked through the doorway into a bright, colourful hospital ward. Two long, neat rows of beds lined the walls. The patients sat beneath their blankets, propped up by plump white pillows. There was an air of quiet activity as nurses in starched white uniforms bustled back and forth between the beds. Then the doors of the ward were flung wide, and in strode a tall, confident man wearing a white coat and a stethoscope, a host of doctors and nurses in his wake, and a youthful Scrooge in a dark suit at the rear of the group.

"Upon my soul," Scrooge exclaimed, "It's old Dr Fuzzywig, the medical superintendent of the hospital. A formidable but decent man. Of the old school—you knew where you were with him." The patients and staff followed Fuzzywig's every command and blushed at his gracious "thank you." "Ah, those were the days. The patients look so well ordered and grateful. Dr Fuzzywig and Matron ruled everything with a rod of iron, but we all worked together. Cooperation! Not very efficient, but we all knew our place—serving Dr Fuzzywig and the patients." Scrooge suddenly started, "What am I talking about? Surely we have learnt the indecision and waste of these old ways. Take me back, Spirit!"

The Spirit said, "Don't believe all that nonsense. You should listen and learn more, Scrooge." With that the doctor's round finished, the doors of the ward swung shut, and Scrooge found himself in the darkness of his bedroom, where he once again fell asleep.

Woken by the shrill screech of the bleep, he saw a fierce light glowing in the adjoining room. Scrooge advanced cautiously, and his eyes met an incredible sight. The room had been completely transformed. The walls were lined by piles of reports, and in the centre was an enormous, leather topped task on which stood a cold cup of coffee and a computer and printer which spat out a continuous printout. A phone rang constantly. As Scrooge watched, a box marked "In Tray" began filling with letters and documents. As the pile reached the ceiling, another in tray appeared and also began filling. On the wall behind the desk was a

large notice: "This is a Quality Organisation and our staff are our most valuable asset."

Scrooge looked around but could not see the Spirit. There was a knock on the door and a harassed young woman appeared.

"Are you the Ghost of NHS Present?" Scrooge asked.

"No—not exactly," the woman said, "he's got held up in a meeting, and the earliest he can see you is a week Thursday. I'm his deputy, but he sent this briefing note for information before your meeting with him." She handed him a piece of paper, and Scrooge read:

Industrial relations: Expect significant difficulty with developing local pay agreements and PRP as you do not have the backing of the consultants, management, or anyone else. You have alienated them by your refusal to communicate.

Management support: Your assistant, Roberta Cratchett, will have a happy Christmas, but hates working for you. You have been unappreciative, unsupportive, provide no leadership or opportunities, refused to contemplate a job share for her, and gave her a PRP band 5 instead of the 2 she deserved.

Conclusion: Must Improve.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS!

"Is that it?" said Scrooge.

"For the moment," the woman answered. "There's heaps more. All negative, I'm afraid, but the Ghost of NHS Present thought you'd like to focus on the main issues initially when you meet. He'll contact you." Then she was gone, as were the piles of paper, and Scrooge sat alone at the empty desk as his bleep sounded loudly for the final time. As it stopped, Scrooge looked up and saw three figures dressed in dark, expensive suits and bright ties. They walked towards Scrooge with broad smiles, their right hands outstretched in greeting. "Hello," they said in unison, "we are the Ghosts of NHS Yet to Come."

Scrooge was puzzled.

"But I was only expecting one of you."

The ghosts smiled and spoke again, "We operate in a mixed economy of health care. With the future increase in consumer choice, you don't want to be restricted to just one potential provider of the future. As a purchaser of NHS Yet to Come you should have a range of options open to you. Here, let us explain what we can offer."

And with that they placed their briefcases on the desk and began to talk rapidly. Scrooge could make out a few words: competitive prices, commitment to quality, increased choice and efficiency, client focus with minimal ancillary costs. The phrases quickened, becoming a blur.

"Stop!" shouted Scrooge in anguish. "Slow down. What does all this mean? What about patients?" The three ghosts and the office door disappeared, and a letter appeared on the desk. Scrooge read:

Termination of employment: Due to your failure to achieve your efficiency and cost-benefit targets you are declared surplus to requirements. Your employment is therefore terminated. You have three hours to clear your desk and leave the premises. Have a nice day.

In horror Scrooge realised the letter was addressed to him. This is what the future held! "No!" he screamed, but already the desk and room were disappearing around him, and he was falling through what seemed like endless darkness.

When Scrooge woke it was light outside, the snow still falling. The night's horrors were fresh in his thoughts, and his mind was racing. Christmas Day! What could he do to make amends? A sudden inspiration struck him, and he reached for an old copy of the *Health Service Journal*. Flicking through the pages he found it: "Managers should come out from behind

"More to the point, can I help you?" he replied. She looked puzzled, so he added "I'm the Trust Chief

Scrooge didn't mind the tickly whiskers on the Santa outfit. After all, he had so many new friends in the hospital now. It was teamwork like this that made him remember why he first joined the NHS. God bless us every one, he thought.