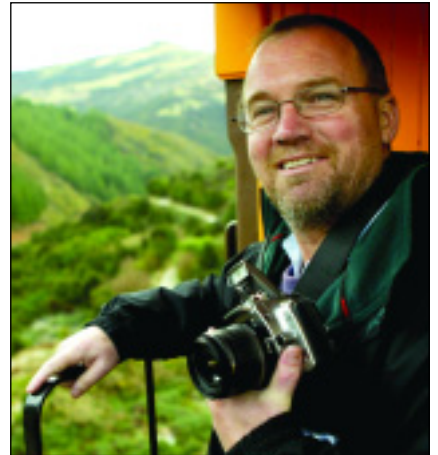


## Another Manic Monday at Nailsea – My Home From Home.

By Alastair Hignell, Patron of The MSRC.

Alastair Hignell, 48, was a top international rugby player and professional cricketer for Gloucestershire before becoming a commentator and reporter for Radio 5 Live. Diagnosed with MS in 1999, he lives in Bristol with his wife Jeannie and sons Adam and Dan. Nailsea is his nearest Therapy Centre.



Alastair Hignell

**"M**onday is my 'me' day. Whatever treatment is available on a Monday, I'll have it – in whichever order suits best. Usually, it starts with physio."

Mary-Jane is coordinating the activities of three physios and seven patients in the gym, Enidd is loading six more into the decompression chamber, Sarah is just starting her second reflexology session of the morning, Shirley is taking bookings for the acupuncturist, the dietician and the counsellor, Val is giving a newcomer a guided tour, Heather is fixing up some coffee, Hugh has popped in to manage the accounts and Keith is implementing the Health and Safety guidelines.

The welding business in the industrial unit next door is at full throttle, the car park is full and the oxygen man wants to make a delivery. At Nailsea, it is just another manic Monday "Ooo-wooo-oooo" as the Bangles might add.

On the first day of the week, the MS Therapy Centre at Nailsea is my second home. For as long as I can remember, I have

pointed my automatic Peugeot 807 (big enough to carry a buggy, left-foot accelerator 'cos my right leg doesn't always respond quickly enough) into the Somerset countryside and lined up for treatment.

Let's be fair, the setting for the present Nailsea MS Therapy



The Nailsea Centre

Centre is far from opulent. It can be found, but only with some difficulty, in one corner of a shabby industrial estate at the back-end of a quiet Somerset village. The facilities are basic. The gym is draughty and poorly insulated-freezing cold in winter and baking hot in summer. The treatment rooms are poorly lit and in need of decoration. The furniture is borrowed or, if not, on borrowed time. (Which is why

we will shortly be moving to new premises under the name of the West of England Therapy Centre.)

But, right from the moment you step through the heavy metal door with the rust showing, you experience nothing but positive vibes. This is a place, dare I say it, powered by love. Relying entirely on donations from well-wishers and its own fundraising, the centre gives back to its "users", far more than it takes from its benefactors.

In one sense, the Centre is the sticking plaster of our lives.

### My 'Me' Day

Of course I know that MS is, like puppy dogs at Christmas, for life and not just for one day, but I reckon that, by concentrating on dealing with the disease one day a week, I have a better chance of managing the other demands on my energy. I try, therefore, to make Monday my treatment day, my R & R day, my "me" day. By and large, my employers, the BBC, try to respect that.

Head physio Mary Jane Jones is an extraordinary person. Unfailingly cheerful, eternally

calm, she bosses the maximum number of patients around the gym with the minimum amount of resources, the maximum amount of efficiency and the minimum amount of fuss. Mary-Jane's assistants, Slavka and Julie, are cut from a similar cloth.

I have to admit that we have deep philosophical differences about physiotherapy. I was always brought up to believe in the "no pain, no gain" theory of exercise. Way back when I used to train regularly, the whole point was to exercise furiously, breathe heavily and sweat profusely. Nike says "Just Do It"; Mary-Jane and the gang's motto is "Just Do It Right."



*Physiotherapy in action*

I have to admit they are right. I used to somehow believe that tiny precise movements of, in my case, fingers, right arm and right leg could not possibly be doing me some good unless I was sweating as well. Now, after experiencing the exquisite triumph of being able to roll a Swiss medicine ball back towards me with a previously unresponsive right heel, I am completely converted to their way of thinking.

After physiotherapy, I try to fit in a reflexology session if my energy levels are particularly low, or an aromatherapy massage if I am feeling particularly stiff. It is usually the latter, but whichever is, Sarah is invariably the practitioner and I always feel a lot better for the next stage of my R & R day, the dive in the tank.

Except that we're not allowed to call it a dive in the tank any

more. In these politically correct days, in which we are no longer classified as patients (thank goodness!), clients or customers, but are instead referred to as "users", the breathing of pressurised oxygen in a Hyperbaric Oxygen Chamber can no longer be described as "a dive in the tank" but as a session in the decompression chamber.

Whatever, it is all the same to me, the chance to breathe pure oxygen in a deep sea diving bell in good company, far away from the phone and with a book to read. Trouble is, after physio and a massage, I tend to fall asleep. I know I shouldn't, but I do. And when I emerge, after an hour at 33 feet, I feel fantastic.

But does it do any good, and if so, how much? Those are questions I'm often asked. I can honestly say I have no idea. I know that I feel better on Monday evening than I do on Monday morning; my body feels better equipped to face a new week. More importantly, so do my spirits.

### The Therapy Centre Fixes Your Equilibrium and Well-Being

MS is not a death-sentence, but it can be a life-sentence. The knowledge that you have an incurable disease, with no known cause, no known cure and no predictable course, takes some getting used to. The way in which the disease takes some or



all of these things away from you- your balance, your energy, your mobility, your muscle control, your bladder control, your eyesight, your ability to swallow- sometimes for now, sometimes for good, always at random and always at the most inconvenient times, plays havoc with your spiritual equilibrium as well as your mental well-being.



*Enidd*

The Therapy Centre fixes both. The warmth of the welcome is genuine and heart-felt, the cheer in the "cheerio" is equally sincere. Go there once and you know you need to go back.

But the Centre at Nailsea is bursting at the seams. There is far greater demand for the services it can offer than it can currently supply. Land has been acquired in Bradley Stoke, and planning permission has been gained. Now all we have to do is raise the £3 million or so to build the Centre that people with MS in the wider Bristol area deserve. If goodwill were bricks and mortar, it would already be up and running. But these are difficult times for charities and there is plenty of competition for benefactors. The task is massive, but so is the belief that the all-new West of England MS Therapy Centre will be built. Watch this space.

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