buyers we should not just play safe and be bound by our preconceptions.

It is precisely because of the scarcity of health funds that we should buy not only like doctors: we should also buy like someone buying a video camera for his own use. As doctors, we do not bargain: we just demand more funds. We do not look around but tend to buy whatever is recommended in the seminars and journals without tailoring it to our own requirements. If we are buying our own video camera we think of our pocket first. Then we ask our friends. We walk around the shops, and test the cameras. We read up the photography journals. Another thing to remember when buying for a hospital with a large budget is that the annual clearance sales and price adjustments, reductions on old products, and fluctuation of international currencies can all significantly affect what we can buy. You have to look beyond the purely clinical viewpoint.

After one year

Meanwhile I started buying cardiac monitors, ventilators, infusion pumps and operating microscopes. I was now more experienced and better informed. Salesmen came regularly, on their own initiative. I now knew which were the good or bad guys. I had good contacts with information sources in other hospitals. I was more used to writing direct to big centres and world authorities for their opinion. I had even once gone on a trip to the manufacturers and to the Institute of Urology in Shaftesbury Avenue—my Disneyland—to discuss my problems and try out unfamiliar instruments. I now knew how to bargain over prices and, more importantly, how to ask for more money from the health authority and public funds. Having watched for over a year how medical products changed and developed I had more idea of the potential of a new product. The knowledge I had gained from the talks on computers I had organised for fun helped me a lot in appreciating these recent changes, which were mostly related to microprocessor technology.

Now the hospital has changed a lot. The angry complaining farmers turn up only very occasionally. Requests for transfer are much less frequent and we no longer feel humiliated when we refer patients. We are now getting more energetic doctors as the news of

modernisation spreads through our friends the salesmen. My operating list is now longer than that of my previous hospital. We are doing some general operations such as cholecystectomy and thyroidectomy which have never been done here before. At first the nurses crowded round to watch; now they just take it as a matter of course. We also do some minor operations that are quite new even to me. On the other hand medical films and lectures are less well attended—they are no longer new to us and our workload is much heavier. As for computers, we got our first set of computers donated, complete with graphics tablet and light pens. We started some small trials, and have already submitted a few papers to medical journals. Because we do not have decades of bulky old files to be tackled I started redesigning patient records for future computer storage. I never dreamt of anything like this in my former hospital—I was simply too preoccupied and too much in a routine.

Now my life is far busier than before, but I feel much happier. I can no longer learn from my colleagues as readily as before, but I know that I learn a lot of other useful things, though in a much harder way. I have attended several courses on economics, accounting, marketing, and continuing medical education, which I quite despised in the past. I read journals less frequently but more regularly and seriously, spurred by thirst for knowledge and fear of being left behind rather than for tackling the coming week's seminar or grand round.

Each member of the bed purchasing team is busy with his many new commitments, but we retain our team spirit. The old friend who brought me here has left for another hospital. She was happy to leave the hospital in the hands of this now more mature team of bed purchasers. As for the beds, we eventually got them, after nearly 10 months. They are four-section stainless steel ones, with epoxy resin coating, that can be raised for peritoneal dialysis, for sitting up, and for the Trendelenburg position; castors with three locking systems; collapsible side rails that are safe to the fingers; and a complete set of flame resistant mattress, overbed table, and IV poles. All easily cleaned and perfectly manoeuvrable, even for a tiny nurse—and all for the same price that we could originally afford for a barren empty bed with nothing else. The Japanese got only half the contract, the other half going to an Austrian company, also new to the market. As for our friend the agent for the Japanese beds, he has been promoted to being the medical equipment executive of that company and is already selling more beds to other hospitals.

Down on the health farm

JANE DAWSON

Few of the guests at the health farm resembled the nineteenth century Englishman in the series of humorous etchings hung immediately opposite the dining room door. He was shown carrying his embonpoint in a wheelbarrow on to the ferry having enjoyed "la cuisine Française." Most of the guests were women of average size aged 30 or more who were having a break from the family; the men in general ran their own businesses, tended to be more obviously overweight, and were concerned about heart disease.

The nucleus of the health farm was a large Victorian house set in landscaped grounds. The greeting in tessella in the bicycle lined porch was appropriately "Salve." Modern wings had been added to accommodate 150 people. There was also a 12.5 metre swimming

pool with steamy plate glass windows, through which a band of Muscovy ducks peered in enviously.

On arrival I had a consultation with one of the many ladies in white. I was weighed and had my blood pressure measured; she also asked me if I was on any medication or had any back problems or varicose veins. When asked the purpose of my stay—weight loss, relaxation, or fitness—I should have added curiosity to the list.

Guests wandered around in the hot house atmosphere in dressing gowns and track suits. The formidable matrons who arrived in fur coats seemed more sympathetic in déshabillé—the towelling robe is a great leveller. My room had a wash basin and toilet. The remote controlled television did not encourage unnecessary physical activity.

When I went to join the early morning stroll, I found that none of the 50 or so other guests was prepared to brave the February weather. The gym instructor who accompanied me on a brisk walk over the surrounding National Trust heathland described the hall as "not for the purists, you don't have to be a galley slave all week." The exercise, weight training, and relaxation classes were better

attended, though the men were conspicuously absent. The images in the mirror at the end of the gym were flatteringly elongated. The sauna and cold plunge produced an unexpectedly pleasant tingling sensation. The effect of the individual steam cabinets was less invigorating and a touch surreal. Disembodied heads chatted animatedly about food additives and osteopathy, while the bodies beneath were boiled like eggs until a cooking timer rang. Then we lay in rows like effigies in a church. The massage that followed was relaxing, although I felt somewhat uncomfortable about being groomed and petted like a monkey. Beauty treatments were popular; many guests paid to have several sessions a day.

Those who had opted for lemon juice or a 500 calorie diet ate in the light diet room, which was suitably furnished with rattan and a soothing green, away from the temptations of the more opulent main dining room with its dark furniture and swagged curtains. For those of us not on stringent diets, lunch was soup, salad, and yoghurt. In the place of prices the dinner menu gave a calorie value for each of the three courses. The staff enjoyed roast potatoes and cherry pie and custard. It was disconcerting to see two John Bull figures who had been joshing one another about their 500 calorie allowances fill up on crispbreads liberally spread with polyunsaturated margarine. A young woman who had come to curb her drinking appreciated the lack of alcohol. Another who had been ringing the changes with four types of sleeping tablets resorted successfully to camomile tea.

Antiques, holistic medicine, and piano recitals

The organised evening entertainment consisted of talks on antiques and holistic medicine and piano recitals. But tales of unofficial forays to Annabel's and "goings on" abounded. An Arab prince was said to have reduced his weight from 22 stones to 16 stones during a five months' stay. These stories may have been as apocryphal as my taxi driver's story of being summoned at midnight by a large lady demanding to be taken 10 miles to the nearest all night chip shop.

What were the features of the hall that had at least two regulars returning for 12 and 18 years? They viewed it as a bolthole, a way to remove themselves from the pressures of their businesses and to escape from the telephone. Any hotel could fulfil these requirements but here they could also avoid being overfed and for a few days pay lip service to a prudent diet. Also spouses were more likely to countenance their partner's going off alone or with a friend to a health farm than to a hotel.

From what I saw of their activities, guests were unlikely to leave after a three or four day stay with any discernible improvement in cardiovascular fitness. But, given the concern and attention of the staff, nor were they likely to exacerbate back or soft tissue injuries or overdo things.

Poor Daniel Lambert, another of the grotesques represented among the bill posters hanging in the corridor, weighed upwards of 50 stones in 1806, and "the more exercise he took, the more he seemed to increase in size." Unlike him I found that walking, swimming, and exercising for a couple of hours a day did produce an unintended weight loss. Perhaps those guests who despite being on stringent diets did not lose weight as they had hoped might have benefited from a similar approach. Some certainly felt too feeble to enjoy extra exercise because they had chosen to go on very low calorie allowances.

I heard no unwarranted claims being made by the staff for any of the facilities that I used. I did not, however, venture on to the wilder shores of aromatherapy and reflexology. Most guests seemed concerned about stress, but I came across only one who was obviously disturbed, pale, and twitchy.

Because of our shared preoccupations and the fact that many of us were on our own, the atmosphere was more sociable than that of a hotel; this had its drawbacks. The stereotyped conversational exchanges about weight loss, job stress, and previous experience of health farms produced the feeling of being at a perpetual cocktail party. After three days I felt more than ready to face the real world again. I had lost 3 lb (£65/lb plus VAT). As the original inscription over the main door said, "Salus exeuntibus."

The Old Hall, Martley, Nr Worcester, the childhood home of Sir Charles Hastings. Reproduced by permission of Jeremy and Joan Campbell Grant, who presented the picture to the BMA in 1986.