For the second successive year, the Glastonbury music festival in June was cursed with an unrelenting deluge of rain, which turned the fields of Worthy Farm into a tent infested quagmire. Not to be thwarted, 100,000 festival goers continued to populate their canvas city, and in the spirit of the Titanic, the bands played on.

The conditions and the sheer volume of people meant that once again the medical team was called upon to deliver care in conditions the stuff of which nightmares are made. Strange then, that I as a volunteer nurse, passed one of the most informative and rewarding weekends of my career.

About a year ago, I read in *Emergency Nurse* Shawn Whelan’s article ‘Emergency nursing in a sea of mud’ (Whelan 1997). I considered his words with a mixture of curiosity, envy and interest, for I too had been at Glastonbury 1997. I was not, however, part of the medical team and allusions to showers and enthusiasm could be deemed nothing but incongruous to my experience. Spurred on by his enthusiasm and a naive certainty that it couldn’t possibly be that wet two years in a row, I volunteered to join in the monumental effort that was set to provide medical services at this year’s festival.

Arriving late on Thursday evening, a light drizzle of rain in the air, I assessed the scene and was elated. The Sahara desert it was not, but the ground was relatively firm underfoot and Wellington boots were not yet compulsory wear. Having pitched camp, an established resident introduced herself and invited me along to join her group of friends in the staff mess tent. They were A&E nurses from London, all of whom had worked at ‘Glasto’ many times before or who had completed their shifts for this year. Listening to them speak, I felt like a student nurse on the first day of my first ward. I felt so unprepared and terrified of how I would cope with what was to come, armed with only a biro and a pair of bandage scissors.

The next morning I trotted off for my first shift in the ‘Dance tent’. It was by now raining steadily
and I thanked my lucky stars that I had been allocated shifts in an undercover area. I met up with the rest of the dance tent crew and we were given a thorough briefing on our role, safety and infection control measures. Before the music began we were given our most essential piece of equipment – ear-plugs! When the music started we knew why, it was ear splittingly, lung vibratingly loud. The day passed quietly, with only two patients requiring minimal attention before returning to the festival. Once relieved by the next shift I returned to the medical compound, my initiation complete, my nerves gone, able to discuss backstage activities and radio communication like a veteran.

As evening fell the heavens opened and it began to rain. A torrential downpour that wore on and on. Around the many camp-
sites hundreds of tents were quickly waterlogged and rendered uninhabitable, my own included. It soon became apparent that if no action were taken, many now homeless festival goers were to face a night exposed to the elements, risking hypothermia or worse. The festival organisers wasted no time in putting a well-devised major incident plan into action. WRVS were drafted in from local towns to provide hot tea. Sleeping-bags, space blankets and dry clothes were produced as if by magic and undercover areas were heated and designated as places of shelter for the night. My own no fixed abode status made me the obvious choice to take part in the provision of care for this vast group of people. Each designated area was allocated a trained nurse to assess ‘refugees’ as they entered and to arrange immediate removal to the medical centre if necessary.

They came and they came, wet, cold and so, so muddy. The Glastonbury spirit though was still not dampened. Many were welcomed into those tents that had survived the downpour. Any dry clothes were shared freely, strangers huddled together for warmth and space blankets moved some to impromptu Gary Glitter impersonations. They drank their tea and slept, prompt action having averted what could have been a disaster.

After a few hours sleep, having now moved into a tent with friends, I went back to the dance tent for my second shift. The muddy conditions had worsened and the dance floor area itself had to be pumped out to facilitate any form of movement upon it. In our cold, wet and dark backstage area we treated dozens of casualties and distributed an inestimable volume of drinking water. It was undeniably hard work, dealing with problems from abdominal pain to lacerations, from hypoglycaemia to inverted ankles. The security guards brought them over the safety barriers and we attended to their needs. This really was emergency nursing, quite literally in a sea of mud. The great thing was that every one of our clients said ‘thank you’. In those cases where casualties were moved to the medical centre for treatment or more thorough assessment than we could provide, their friends came and said ‘thank you’. How often can we say that on a Saturday night in a city A&E department?

We finished the shift dirtied, bloodied and exhausted. The level of job satisfaction I felt at that moment was indescribable. I returned to the medical compound for a post shift beer and chat on an adrenaline high.

Having come down to earth with a bump and a headache on Sunday morning, we drank our tea and listened to the music drifting over the site from the main stage. At 6pm, I reported for duty at the medical centre and was allocated to work as the triage nurse. In view of the conditions, the efficiency of the staff and the standard of treatment was remarkable. No one had a protracted wait and enthusiasm did not fade even though those cases of trench foot just kept on coming. The psychiatric team too continued to cope calmly and professionally with those for whom the festival had proved too much. Paranoia, psychosis and acute anxiety were all taken in their stride. The shift ended at 2am and for me the Glastonbury experience was over.

Will I be going back next year? Without a doubt! It is difficult to explain why, partly the chance to practice with such a level of autonomy, partly the knowledge that you are providing such an essential service. Certainly, the tremendous mood and atmosphere among the entire medical crew, both on and off duty. Yes, I’ll certainly be going back for more of the same next year and fingers crossed the sun will shine on us.

Here’s hoping that 1999 will be third time lucky for me.

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Reference