Dr Bob Adams (b. 1957)

After leaving school I got a job as a nursing assistant in a large mental hospital near where I lived. The year was 1975 and I was 17 years old. The hospital was a traditional Victorian asylum with many long-stay wards. I was naïve and knew nothing about mental illness. I shared the public’s view that people with mental illness were somewhat different from us and I had to be careful for my safety. I arrived on the first day full of trepidation, was given a white coat and taken to a male ward. I planned to stay for a few months pending interviews for medical school. I ended up staying for a year. It was busy at the beginning and end of the day, mealtimes and medication times. The rest of the time there was little to do and I sat with those patients who did not go to industrial therapy and if the weather was fine took them for a walk around the gardens in a long column. Nursing assistants were not allowed to work on the ‘admission wards’, which seemed like another world the other side of the gardens. I whiled away the time by drawing the patients. Some of them never spoke. When I asked them to sign their names on their portraits I was amazed that they could write perfect signatures (deleted for reasons of confidentiality). Looking at the pictures now I can remember the patients as if it was yesterday – all their nuances, foibles and mannerisms. If I had not had that experience, it is doubtful that I would have spent the past 20 years working as a psychiatrist. (Text and pictures courtesy of Dr Bob Adams, Consultant Psychiatrist, Selby and York Mental Health Services, York YO30 7BY.)