

In the bleak midwater

As we plunge headlong into the darker days of winter there are not just the long evenings to contend with but also the change in the weather. In the practice that means raincoats for example, and hats, and boots and ... umbrellas... **Stephen Hancocks** dodges the drips.

In the practice there's the slightly vexing question of what to do with wet umbrellas. It's a familiar enough scenario. Your team member makes a rapid dash up the driveway or across from the bus shelter and into the porch, where they stand gasping in the slightly clammy atmosphere of the entrance way, peering out from under a hood which has slipped comically at an angle over one eye, or perhaps some make-shift head gear fashioned from a supermarket check-out bag. Worse still, one of those custom-made fancy-patterned clear plastic rain hats that fold down to a flat strip and looks like it has come straight out of a docu-drama of 1960s Houston in the run up to President Kennedy's assassination. 'Never seen rain like it,' they venture, though doubtless they have – we all seem to have very short memories when it comes to torrential rain. 'I'd just got past Muggeridge's on the corner of Sampson Street when it started tipping down. Ugh.' There's always an 'ugh' for extra effect and to mop up any surplus sympathy that might be sloshing around.

But it's what happens next that can put the team to the test. Your colleague has one

of several options, which you can score from one (mild distain) to 10 (for goodness sake!); they carefully collapse the broolly and squeeze it deftly into a small nylon pouch where it quietly resides until they next go out. Or, they walk with it, point down and dripping, the full length of the practice leaving a trail of water either across the tiled floor making it a health and safety slip-hazard nightmare, or a dark streak of what looks distinctly unhygienic across the carpet. Worst of all, as they puff their 'ugh' some will simultaneously flap said umbrella up and down, up and down, leaving a peppered spray of water spots all over the *Observer* special offer twentieth century classics Andy Warhol *Campbell's Soup Can* reproduction hanging in the reception area. Stains which people will still squint at come next June wondering if those particular dots are supposed to be there or not. But do not fret too much, after all how many patients will have ever seen an original to compare it with?

The problem of the wretched soggy thing (the umbrella, not the team member) (although on second thoughts...) is compounded by the usually constrained, not to

say, small confines of

the practice premises. Let's be honest, there's rarely enough room for the arm of an x-ray unit or for the door of the autoclave to fully open never mind the tent-like area required for a fully spread gamp.

Even if there is space

for one to be opened out to dry it is highly unlikely

that the room will allow for those of the entire staff, given that the dentist and

hygienist have probably only had to dash in from the car park anyway, with at most an upturned collar.

Alternatively there is the maddening temptation to leave it in the sink. Not an unreasonable habit at home, where there's the bath to let the raindrops ripple off in fluffy towelled solitude but absolutely infuriating when you are trying to make tea in a hectic rush because at last there's been a cancellation which has just given time for a quick cuppa. The flailing panels of nylon stick to the outside of the kettle while you're trying to fill it in much the same way as the shower curtains cling repeatedly and tenaciously to your legs and bottom in the bathrooms of posh hotels. Why is that? Then you accidentally drop a used teabag down between the spokes and in trying to fish it out knock over a mug already containing milk which runs in twisting rivulets down the handle and into your shoe.

However, if this pantomime is calculated to drive you up the wall, how much more exasperating can it be when patients present you with their wet-weather apparatus? Smart practices will doubtless have a proper umbrella stand conveniently located by the front door. In fact probably also having a rather pretentious little enamelled sign on it saying 'umbrella stand' just in case anyone was thinking of putting, or doing, anything else into it.

But you have to smile pleasantly and either point them to the said stand or say 'shall I take that from you? No, no trouble at all, I'll put it somewhere safe. Remind me when you go and I'll get it back.' All the while wondering where on earth you're going to find space for it with three others already blocking the staff room door and one showered in instant coffee granules on the draining board.

Never mind, it'll soon be summer again and although it doesn't entirely remove the threat of rain, at least if the fashion for shade rather than sun continues, perhaps parasols may make a comeback. And their huge advantage? No drying required.

