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Bowls

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Mrs Montgomery was one of those rather timid women who lived life under the shadow of a domineering man. Ernest's mesothelioma killed him slowly and Olive went through a very hard time during his illness. They had one daughter who now lives in the States. As happens so often, her bereavement could be a disaster or an opportunity to find a new life.

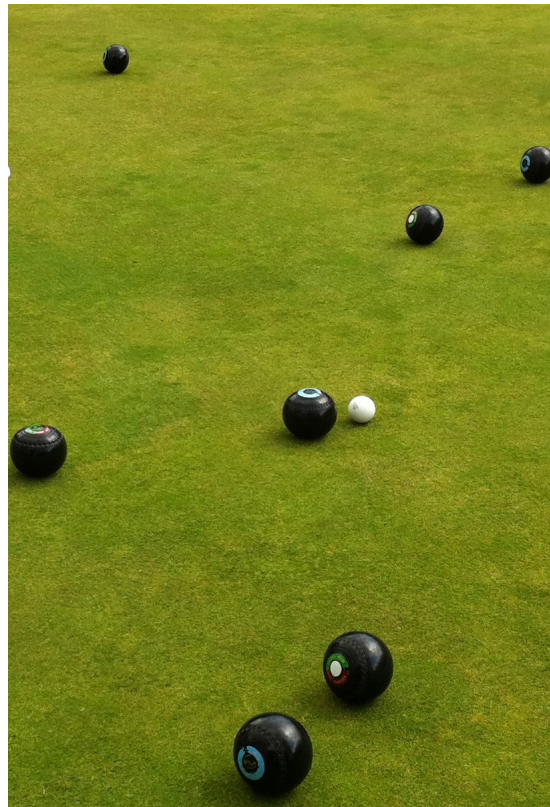
"Mrs Montgomery, good to see you again. How is Ernest? Oh, I'm most dreadfully sorry, So he passed away in hospital 2 weeks ago. How awful that I hadn't been told. Of course I will contact the ward straight away and find out why we weren't informed."

"Yes, it turns out that the new ward receptionist didn't know the system. How are you? Do you have any plans? Sometimes a distraction can help after a loss like yours. So you've been talking to Mrs Evans and I agree that she is indeed a very enthusiastic person. Bowls? My mother-in-law used to play, though I guess that that may not be the best of recommendations. Let me know how you get on."

"So the "New bowler" session went OK. No, you really mustn't worry about the hip replacement, walking up and down a 40 metre green for an hour or two is the best thing you could do. What? The rest of them look older than you? So you get exercise and a bit of flattery on the side, that can't be so bad. How's Mrs Evans? I see, she's even started eyeing up a few men for you and that is not exactly your style. No comment! Keep me informed"

"I'm glad to hear that you've gone back to bowls after that nasty cold. You're quite good then. So you used to be a good tennis player before you were married and the long unused ball skills are coming back. How are you getting on without Ernest, it's been almost a year now? Yes, of course you are still very sad. So, joining the bowls club has been a good idea. Maybe having forceful friends like Mrs Evans was not such a bad thing after all"

My friend and bowls commentator, David Rees-Jones says that bowls is an easy game, You just have to get the



Above and below: Bowls on Redland Green

wood closer to the jack than anyone else and you win. Of course there is a bit more to it than that. The wood (bowl to you) is asymmetrical so rolls in a curve, not a straight line. The outdoor bowls green will vary with temperature, humidity and the amount of play, making it vary from day to day. Individual rinks on a single green will vary, never mind the difference between greens. Getting the wood reasonably close to where you want it involves working out the combination of the direction and force of throw - not an easy task

This, of course, is bad enough by itself but when you have an opponent that



is hell bent on knocking out even your best attempts and will deliberately place woods in such a position to make it impossible for you to win then the game gets more interesting, or possibly infuriating, depending on your mood at the time.

So was bowls a good idea for our Mrs Montgomery? May be not if she hated the idea, but for someone like her who is facing bereavement after a lifetime of subservience the opportunity to develop a new skill might be, literally, a life saver.

Consider the advantages. It's accessible; almost every town has a green, some have two, both indoor and outdoor. It involves physical activity though I must admit that lifting heavy weights and breathlessness are rarely seen. You need to develop considerable coordination skills, and having physical disabilities such as arthritis is absolutely no bar to playing. Remarkably, bowling by partially sighted and blind people is very popular. Possibly the most important aspect, especially for the likes of Mrs Montgomery, is that it is very sociable. Games are played in teams; every club has an extensive programme of social events; matches are played against other local clubs in leagues and if you are really enthusiastic you can go on the annual summer tour.

The disadvantages? I guess that like any other sport, it tends to be led by the enthusiasts who cannot quite understand that people may have other things to do in their lives. The rules, regulations and dress codes give the feeling that things have not moved on much since about 1955 and I suspect that bowls was one of the last bastions of discrimination against women, but things have changed. Finally and sadly, it is a game that is played largely by the retired classes. Maybe a David Beckham range of bowls attire would help to encourage younger players, who knows.

Should clinicians keep bowls in mind when meeting people like Mrs Montgomery? Absolutely. It will cost the commissioning group nothing and may just change a life for the better.