David Mitchell

I want to talk to you about the NHS. And its IT system. Wait, come back...

This column is going to be about the NHS computer system – you know, that attempt to computerise everyone's medical records, which has cost such a lot of money and doesn't work. That is the subject I am determined to write about, even if it kills me.

It really feels like it might kill me. Reading even one article about it is like trying to stare directly at the sun. I desperately want to turn away, dazzled by the tedium. I'd rather gaze at anything else. An advert for a handbag on the opposite page, a dried drip on the outside of my tea mug, the fascinating patina of flaking plaster under the windowsill. This is bad. The economic climate is far too harsh for me suddenly to lose my powers of concentration, the synapses I honed as a vocab-learning swot.

I'm getting the impression from the glimpses of the paper that I'm able to endure that the scheme is going to cost another £2bn even though it's being wound up – that we have to spend that or we'll get sued by the people who won the contract to, as it turns out, not actually do the job; that the massive oil tanker of government spending can't turn round in less than a couple of billions of distance.

Is £2bn a lot still? Or is it one of those sums which, considering the scale of the enterprise, "isn't that much when you think about it"? In order to check, I'd have to think about it and I really don't want to. It's so frustrating and depressing but, much more than that, it's terribly, witheringly, heartbreakingly boring.

I keep pacing round and round my flat as if I'm trying to walk off a back twinge. If I were a different sort of person, trying to focus on this would probably have provoked a frenzy of DIY. Instead I absently help myself to slices of cheese whenever I pass the fridge.

By calling it boring, I don't mean to imply that it's not important. Boring and important are not mutually exclusive terms. And I really want to talk about it. I get annoyed by how dismissively the project is often

referred to. Some people seem to think not just that the Blair government's scheme has been unnecessarily expensive and disappointing in its results, but that the whole notion of trying to computerise patient records, of a single joined-up NHS computer system, is frivolous and flawed. To them it's not vital infrastructure but something on which bureaucrats have been frittering away money that should have been spent on medicine and incubators, which we could proudly stack up in a car park, safe in the knowledge that they're there when they're needed, if only we had any way of telling who needed them and where.

I think this attitude undermines their criticisms. I'm convinced that, in the long run, fully computerising the NHS is vital. And the attempt was bound to be fraught with difficulty and expense. So I start to wonder how much worse than par the achievements of those charged with it actually are. Are people who are luddite enough completely to deny the necessity of such a scheme really qualified to judge? Are we binning out on it at

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exactly the wrong time, at the darkest part of the night?

I rather approve of what Richard Granger, who ran the programme until he resigned in the face of its manifest failure in 2007, said of it three years earlier: "I would draw comparisons with the great public works activities in the Victorian era – Joseph Bazalgette building the London sewage system, Brunel and
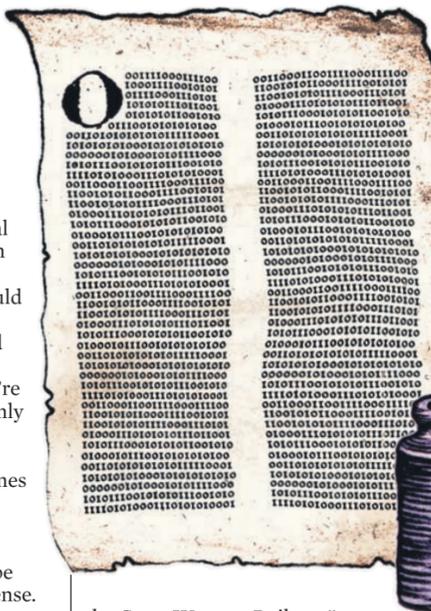
the Great Western Railway." Maybe giving up now is like Brunel saying: "Sod this, there's a hill in the way! Why waste money digging a tunnel when I could just go round it in my horse and cart?"

How's everyone finding this subject, by the way? Yeah, I know what it's like – you'll be fewer in number as every word goes by. The mention of the NHS in the headline will, like the first wave of machine-gun fire at the Somme, have mown down the majority; then a whiff of IT will have worked like mustard gas on the rest; and now a straggling remnant are being sniped at by other activities, by chores, by the TV: Andrew Marr might be talking about something funny in parliament or that comfy new planet astronomers have found or the weird witch's house that just got dug up in Lancashire.

But stick with me, you unhappy few. I believe in the redemptive power of boredom. That's why I took Latin GCSE. Nothing sharpens the brain like a whetstone of tedium, so

I'm sure thinking about computers will do you good. "Coding is the new Latin," as Alex Hope, MD of Double Negative, an Oscar-winning visual effects company, puts it. He has co-written a report calling for computer science, a grounding in actual coding rather than just teaching people how to open slightly outdated versions of Microsoft Excel, to be taught in schools.

This makes a lot of sense to me. Like Latin, it would require concentration and an application of logic; it would teach the vital skills of pushing through the boredom barrier in order to solve problems. And, while Latin gives an insight into the structure and history of our own language, a grounding in coding would help people understand how these maddening machines we all now completely rely on actually work. And if it meant that more young Britons became obsessive coders in later life, that can only help the economy. The creation of software is one of the few manufacturing industries in which Britain still has a chance of competing globally.

Computers are not a fad. Intellectually, most of us accept that but, to all but the very youngest who are reading this, that's not how it feels. To us, these machines are an imposition, a distraction, something stultifying that dominates our lives but we somehow feel shouldn't. That misapprehension is the curse of our generation. I pity us, staring at screens, bored out of our minds, uncomprehending slaves to this new multipurpose spinning jenny. But we may as well be railing against the written word itself. At some point, the NHS, like everything else, has to be fully networked, whatever it costs. It's virtually as important as oxygenating the blood of its patients.

Still, soon be Christmas.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID FOLDVARI

Celebrities, take note: if you haven't covered Bowie, you haven't made it. Fashion's obsession with the space oddity reached new heights this year, with stylists chomping at the bit to make women look like a man who looks like a woman. In this month's French *Vogue*, Kate Moss's Ziggy Stardust plants the trend firmly in the mainstream, which will no doubt usher in a season of ginger mullets on guys and gals alike. These days it almost seems bad form not to mark a thriving career by paying respect to the godfather of glamorous androgyny. Here, we've selected some of the best homages.
Annalies Winny

KATE MOSS
French Vogue: the British model lends her icy glare to classic Ziggy Stardust.

FLORENCE WELCH
Japan Vogue: Karl Lagerfeld styles Welch as part–Bowie, part... Lagerfeld. Naturally.

KAROLÍNA KURKOVÁ
Moda: Czech model Kurková does classic glam–rock for the Polish fashion magazine.

TILDA SWINTON
W magazine: the ultimate Bowie doppelganger channels his Thin White Duke persona.