

It's been a rough couple of weeks. Not for me – for my 86-year-old cousin Margaret. She had emergency surgery after a hole opened up in her intestines and acid leaked into her belly.



Thanks to the skill of her surgeon, Neil McDevitt, and the attentive care of the health care professionals at Beaufort Memorial, she came through it all right.

Visiting her at the ICU has been a new experience for me. I've never had any close family members get sick enough to stay in the hospital more than just a day.

They are either well enough to stay sick at home and get better, or they get so sick they just up and die before they ever grace the door of the emergency room.

So I've never had much reason to venture into the hospital proper. I am familiar, however, with the hospital cafeteria, because it used to be one of the most popular places for Sunday dinner in all of Beaufort.

When I was a teenager, the hospital cafeteria was the only place to get regular food around here on a Sunday afternoon. You could go to Burger King for fast food or to Canton for Chinese, and for a while we had access to Mexican at Taco Tico.

But to get a meat and three, the hospital was the place to be.

It was also a sort of grand denominational mixer. Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans and whoever else could rub elbows with each other, and share the news about who was sick and who was getting married and who just had a baby.

Every week, after church services were over and the post-church talk had petered out, you could find a long line of folks dressed in their Sunday best, getting plates full of fried chicken and green beans and mashed potatoes, with jello du jour for dessert, or maybe a piece of cake.

The crowd might be thin if there was a covered-dish lunch at one of the churches, but that seemed to happen on a rotating basis. I'm sure the congregations didn't get together and plan it that way. It was a purely unintentional prevention of overcrowding in the hospital cafeteria.

It's a good thing it worked out like that, though, or there could have been a lot more internicene fighting over the good tables.

Back then it was rumored that the same outfit that ran Morrison's Cafeterias had the contract for Beaufort Memorial, so in addition to the socializing, there was also some name-brand cachet attached to the experience of eating there.

There was another advantage to eating at the hospital: it made it easier to visit patients immediately after dinner. None of this business of driving from church to Burger King, then Burger King to the hospital, especially if you had a car full of kids who, before each leg of the trip, fought bitterly over who got to sit where.

So it was convenient. You park, eat, visit, drive away, and you're done.

But I imagine it was tough on some of the patients. As you know, not all patients have the same social needs. There are cheerful sick people who like getting a lot of visitors. Then there are the poor, tired souls who just want to get some sleep. I'm sure that, other than death, there's nothing they dread more than the inevitable Sunday afternoon tide of well wishers, all of whom look as if they're dressed for your funeral.

The hospital cafeteria has a different contractor running it now. The food is still pretty good, if you like the meat and three on a Sunday. I understand they have exotic dishes like pizza on the weekdays, but I don't go then because it's way too crowded.

Beaufort has plenty of places to eat at on Sundays now, so the hospital cafeteria doesn't pack in the crowds like it used to. But there is still a sizeable number of people who show up

there after church each week.

And the view is better than ever. There is a canopied patio overlooking the Beaufort River, so when the weather is warm, you can sit outside and enjoy the fresh air and sunshine without the unhealthful effects of exposure to direct sun.

My cousin Margaret is doing as well as can be for an 88-pound person who lives on a diet of grits, yogurt, applesauce, canned peaches and salt. She keeps her lipstick next to her bed, and she has faced the fact that she won't be able to live at home alone again.

And I'm facing the fact that the hospital is more than just a place for Sunday dinner – it's a place where precious lives are saved. I'm a big fan now.

There's going to be a big fundraiser for the hospital soon – it's \$150 a head, beyond the means of most Beaufortonians.

But did you know you can make smaller – or larger -- donation online using your credit card? If you visit www.bmhsc.org and click on "Donate Now" you can make a donation of \$50 or more to the Beaufort Memorial Hospital Foundation.

And maybe one of these days I will see you in the cafeteria after church.