

Last month, I visited Prince Phillip Hospital here in West Wales. My role as a Service Delivery Manager does not ordinarily entail seeing patients in a hospital setting, so this had been the first time I had been present on a ward in a long time - and honestly, I feel guilty to admit to you that I had forgotten what it was like to see patients in a hospital setting. This led me to reflect on how a huge part of my role in management involves dealing with numbers, data, statistics; numbers of patients on a waiting list, numbers of patients waiting too long on a waiting list. Numbers. As I travelled home in the car after my visit, it really hit home that I can sometimes become so embroiled in the day-to-day business operations of my role, that on occasion, I am blinded to the fact that behind each waiting list figure, each theatre slot, the data I deal with on a daily basis, is a person, a human being, with a life, a family, a job, a hobby, a story.

So, whilst I have been fortunate to have had generally very good health, I have been on the receiving end of care as a patient myself. We will all have a clear memory of those early weeks of the covid pandemic. An incredibly surreal time, I am sure we can all agree. I am drawn to one memory in particular. I was outside in my garden, with Steff my boyfriend and Eli my sister. The sun, unusually for the UK, was shining, we were having a glass of wine, enjoying the weather, waiting for our Easter Sunday roast to cook; asking that classic question 'how long do we think this covid malarky will last then?'

In the days leading up to this, I had been busy in the Principality Stadium in Cardiff, working long hours with a huge team of people who had come together to develop what became, the Dragon's Heart Field Hospital. Covid was in its very early stages at the time; we knew little about the effects of the virus, other than that it could be potentially dangerous to the elderly, or to vulnerable people suffering from certain medical conditions.

So, a couple of days after Easter Sunday, when I started feeling un-well and eventually tested positive for Covid, I had no reason to worry. I was young, fit and healthy and didn't fall into that high-risk criteria. Four weeks later, I was still feeling unwell; experiencing acute shortness of breath and pain in my chest and back so I went to see the GP. Because of my recent positive Covid test, I was asked to attend a 'red zone' practice, which had increased infection prevention control measures in place to reduce the risk of spreading the virus. Looking back, it was such a bizarre experience. Despite feeling really weak and fragile, I wasn't able to sit down; at risk of contaminating the chairs and during my consultation with the GP, I had to stand at the very far end of a massive room, with limited view of the GP's face for signs of reassurance. Following the

GP's assessment, I was sent off to the Hospital to have more tests, as it was suspected I had blood clots on my lungs. I vividly remember how scared I felt walking into A&E, leaving Steff behind at the door; as relatives were not allowed inside the hospital. The eeriness of the waiting room, which was unusually quiet, the hard plastic chairs, which I was able to sit down on this time with absolutely no idea what was ahead of me.

I still feel emotional when I think of my sister and my boyfriend at home, my parents over a hundred miles away, every one of them must have been so worried. The wait to hear how I was getting on must have been extremely difficult for them all. We laugh about it now, but as a means of distraction, they were apparently busy cooking; baking a pie, brownies, a banana loaf the classic lockdown bake, gosh knows who they thought was going to eat them all, given we weren't allowed guests in the house at the time!

From the tests I had undertaken, doctors couldn't provide any known explanation for my symptoms. My chest x-ray was clear, my bloods other than showing signs of infection were clear. I remember Steff coming to collect me from the hospital. We were both in tears. The sleeve of my white top covered in blood from the cannulation, and that feeling of temporary elation that nothing serious was wrong. Little did I know that this would be followed with 2 months of continued suffering, from the same symptoms, with no obvious explanation or light at the end of the tunnel.

I was incredibly fortunate to have amazingly supportive clinical colleagues who continually checked in on my symptoms, recommending I purchase an oxygen saturation monitor, to keep an eye on any indications my shortness of breath may be entering dangerous territory. Those of you that know me know I like my jewellery. Well, the finger monitor to measure my oxygen saturation levels wasn't half as glamorous I tell you. After a couple of days of periodic monitoring, one colleague in particular was concerned at the results, and supported me in obtaining an appointment with a Respiratory Specialist. I enjoy running and have run several half marathons in the past. Yet at the time, I was not able to walk up a short flight of stairs without pausing and taking extra breath.

During the appointment, I was asked by this specialist to jog on the spot; my obvious breathlessness and lack of energy led her to joke whether indeed I had ever run a half marathon before; which I promised I had. Her smile and laughter quickly dissipated, and I vividly remember that look in her eyes; that look of 'something is wrong here'! This followed with me being sent for a

number of further investigations, an echo, a CT and asked to return home whilst they waited for the results. At the time, I was almost numb to any worry. So many months had passed by without an explanation for my symptoms, I had started questioning whether I was making it all up. So receiving a call from the specialist, asking me to quickly return to the hospital to discuss the results of my tests was a shock! I remember all the questions floating around in my head. What is she going to tell me? Having never had a hospital investigation in the past, I even questioned whether she was going to tell me I had cancer! It turned out that my CT had picked up a number of micro-clots on my lungs, which were so small they had not been picked up by my previous blood tests. This went some of the way to explaining why I had been feeling the way I had for so long. Little did I, nor my family know that these early days of acute leg pain, back pain, fatigue, would lead into months of uncertainty and almost a year of suffering. It transpired that I was likely suffering with long Covid. Me, a young, fit and healthy girl in her 20's.

2.9% of the UK population are said to have suffered from long Covid, which when quoted as a number, a statistic, does not in any way take into account the pain or suffering I experienced, nor the pain or suffering my family and friends experienced. I was one of the people behind that statistic. Doesn't that tell you how easy it is to become blinded by figures? Statistics, figures, patient data, they are an anonymous number on paper, yet sitting behind each and every one of those figures is a person.

We often talk in the NHS about putting patients at the centre of everything that we do. Centring our decision making on what's best for the patient. But what does that mean? How do we, in particular individuals in non-patient facing roles, remind ourselves of the patient, the person, the human being behind those figures that we deal with on a daily basis? Here are the 3 things I pledge to live by:

**Get out there** – just as my experience visiting Prince Phillip highlighted, there is nothing more powerful than visiting areas where patient care is delivered. So, prioritise making time for yourself, or your team to get out into clinical settings to remind yourself of the care we deliver.

**Remind yourself of your purpose** – every one of us, whether we know it or not, will have a reason for choosing to work in the NHS. Mine for example stemmed from voluntary work on a stroke unit whilst I was in school, fuelled by my desire to help people. Yet when I am knee deep in spreadsheets or negotiating with a supplier on the price of loan equipment to keep the service

running, given I am not seeing patients on a daily basis as my clinical colleagues are, it's easy to forget the true purpose of my work. So drawing back on that passion that fuelled my desire to come and work in the NHS is I believe, a useful grounding technique.

**Put yourself in others' shoes** – at the end of the day, we are all human, with our own lives, our own stories. How would we want our family and friends to be treated? How would we want to be treated ourselves? Both compelling questions to keep asking myself.

Behind every statistic, every number , there is a patient, a person, a human being, and how powerful could it be if we reminded ourselves of this as we go about our daily roles? The capability of drawing on that humility is perfectly summarised by the noun "sonder" which I am going to leave with you as a closing message today.

Sonder: "The profound feeling of realising that everyone, including strangers passing in the street, has a life as complex as one's own, which they are constantly living despite one's personal lack of awareness of it".

Sara Edwards

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