

Medical Centre Annual Report 2020

This is of course a very different report to that which I would have been writing were we not now in a Pandemic.

UK General Practice sits at the heart of the NHS and prides itself on being at the forefront of providing patient centre care to local communities. It has many strengths with perhaps its' greatest

Coping with the Covid Pandemic: a perspective from General Practice

being the ability to cope with and embrace challenge and uncertainty, turning this into opportunity and innovation. The resilience of its staff is often tested but in my 30 years of working for the NHS I have never found myself so challenged as during the last three months. Perhaps naively, I and many of my colleagues thought that we would never encounter a pandemic in our lifetime. The danger was there and some years ago we had even been involved in preparatory exercises, but it seemed a distant threat and there were many other priorities.

As the worldwide threat from Coronavirus heightened it still felt to be a situation that was under control and our efforts were centred on following the guidelines to manage suspect cases which at this stage were still focused on those with a relevant travel history. By the middle of March it was clear this wasn't enough and ahead of lockdown we swiftly changed our procedures and moved to a system of total phone triage, with our front door closed to patients: our priority being to protect our patients, our staff and ourselves whilst still providing an essential service.

We worked with our colleagues in other surgeries through the Weald and Ridge Primary Care Networks and were relieved to be part of the Covid Assessment Unit at Headcorn Aerodrome where the excellent organisation and structures in place gave us the confidence to work and assess our patients safely.

As we entered lockdown the challenges, we faced were enormous and at times felt overwhelming. To list but a few:

- Risk assessing patients with Covid-19, managing not just their physical symptoms but their fears and anxieties
- Assimilating the myriad of new clinical guidelines to treat patients with Covid-19
- Supporting patients and their families with complex medical issues without the ability to call on usual resources and services
- Enhanced infection control procedures
- Treating patients in their cars or the marquee
- Procuring and wearing PPE
- Reading and acting on the numerous daily updates and changes in standard operative procedures from NHS England, PHE and the local CCG.
- The need to rapidly develop IT solutions to allow for remote working of staff
- Keeping up to speed with communicating changes in services via FaceBook, Twitter, website and answerphone messages.
- Consulting almost entirely via phone and video
- Reaching crisis point and coping with a skeleton staff

But the biggest challenge was coping with the anxiety and fear that for the first time in our careers the nature of our work posed a threat of illness to us and our families.

In the face of a time of crisis for the NHS it felt that the role of General Practice was to support our secondary care colleagues and manage the strain on the NHS by caring for our patients and at times treating conditions in the community which would usually have necessitated hospital care.

We survived but only with the help of those around us. The selflessness and commitment of our team has been exceptional: in the face of personal risk they demonstrated a determination to remain professional and focused on supporting each other and on providing care to our patients. We have always hoped to not just work for but with the local community and we have never felt more supported or appreciated. It was amazing to see how the residents and businesses of Marden came together to look after each other. The kind words, rainbow pictures and tasty treats were all much appreciated. We were grateful for the understanding of our patients who respectfully kept their distance at a time when they knew we were fraught and worked with us to understand the new systems.

And now we barely recognise ourselves! We have swapped our smart shirts for scrubs and PPE, the building has been stripped of all soft furnishing; we have Perspex screens in reception and only 4 chairs in the waiting room. The smell of bleach greets us in the morning and at times it is eerily quiet with so few patients attending, we are socially distancing and there is less face-to-face interaction. We miss what we have lost: the gentle reassurance of seeing patients and the familiarity of working in close proximity with our colleagues. The wearing of masks and visors are a necessity, but they can create a barrier; we hope you know that behind the masks we have faces of reassurance, care and concern.

The word "crisis" is said to comprise two characters in Chinese, one representing danger the other opportunity. The dangers of this pandemic are all too evident, but we are now cautiously optimistic that there may be opportunities too. Many of the new guidelines have demonstrated that we could be working more efficiently to prioritise care for those in most need. We have discovered that we can successfully consult by phone or video for many medical problems. Our patients have grown in their confidence and ability to self-manage minor problems. The Electronic Prescribing Service is allowing us to work more efficiently. Staff are successfully working from home and many of our meetings now happen virtually. Digital online consulting tools have potential to improve access. We are looking at improving our recall systems for chronic disease management. Collaboration with other local surgeries has improved, together we are looking and planning for how we will cope with a second wave of Covid-19 should it come. We think we will be better prepared.

Our mind is also turning to the need to expand the capacity of the building to accommodate the additional patients from the new housing. We have also found ourselves under increasing pressure to provide safe clinical spaces in the building. As a medium term solution we are considering installing a portacabin in the carpark: the benefits being a quicker completion time with less disruption. The facility will allow us to see patients in complete isolation.

We may never return to "normal" and there is sadness in that, but there is also the knowledge that we have grown in confidence and learnt from the challenges of this pandemic. The care we give may look different in the coming months and we have much to contend with, but there is a hope that, as we come through this pandemic together, General Practice will not only remain the bedrock of the NHS but will possibly change for the better.