

Physicians personal journey through (the story of..) COVID

Rita Rigg

The situation for primary care had been changing regularly since the outbreak of Covid19 here in Britain, with frequent revised advice, accelerating to daily updates. It was hard to keep up, to find, at the time I needed them, the right referral pathways which were also changing daily. Time spent dealing with this was eating into the allocated 10 minute consultation time, let alone the time spent with more than normal frequent, rigorous hand washing. The pressure was palpable for all members of the team from the receptionists, to the nurses, to the GPs. This anxiety, pressure and stress were recognised by the NHS who set up a support service to help us manage, unheard of and unprecedented. The NHS has not been known to care for those who care. I had begun to feel the emotional discomfort of uncertainty.

On the 15th March 2020 I was prompted, unprepared but strongly driven by the strength of my concerns, to stand up after Mass to speak to the congregation. I tried to convey to them the importance of taking the situation seriously, to be prepared for what was to come and to learn to follow with confidence and humility the guidance of our experts. And then...6 days later I sent the following email to a few friends "I am now unwell with suspected probable Covid 19. I have consulted occupational health (took me 4 hours to get through, run off their feet no doubt) and they have confirmed this likelihood. Frustratingly there is no testing for us as yet. I guess I was exposed to heavy viral loads whilst working almost full-time last week when the virus was definitely circulating in the community. We had no personal protection equipment. I am at risk because of my asthma. I nevertheless am fit and healthy generally. I don't feel great, like a really bad flu but now on day 4 although weak my lungs seem ok. I am anxious and anxious for my family. Self isolation is strict and being locked in my room with no human contact is much harder than I imagined. I am too weary and weak to use FaceTime and WhatsApp or even to make a phone call to communicate. So unlike me...but I pray and hope. I managed to dress and walk around my garden for ten minutes yesterday midday and slept for 10 hours afterwards. I am grateful to you for thoughts and prayers. It feels very consoling to know people are with you in spirit when you feel so alone. I realise there will be many who are and will be affected but again pray that by the time they are the virulence will have lessened."

Day 5...halfway there...perhaps...it was not a great night, restless, burning up, sweats. This was disappointing after a better day yesterday. It has been a very strange journey to date...in brief, I slept, confined to one room, for the first three days. Telling people was a hard decision. Tony was the first one to know, when realising that I was probably coming down with typical symptoms I explained to him that he needed to go into another room. That was in the early hours of Tuesday morning (first day). It so happened that first thing on Tuesday morning at about 8 one of my closest and dearest friends phoned me about a different matter. I shared with him my suspicions and concerns that I may have Covid 19. Later on that morning another friend texted me, asking me to join her for a walk. I told her too. Some 15 hours after my first symptoms I told one of my sons. The next day I told the rest of my children. I did not want to worry them and it was a balance as to whether or not to tell them. They have been a tremendous support. I have, over the past day, told friends and family. Knowing the support, love and prayers has boosted me no end and quelled my anxiety. It was a hard step to take but I was very glad I did. It is the self-isolation that is the most difficult. It is very strict when one person has the symptoms. The restrictions for the person with symptoms last 7 days at least. They apply to all close household contacts for 14 days, with no exceptions for going out. This is in contrast to the advice which applies to the rest of the “well” population which allows for outings for 2 essential reasons. I have to stay alone, away from my husband, confined to my bedroom, with my door closed. We are lucky to be able to have a spare room. The bathroom is not en suite. Every time I leave my room I put on gloves and a face mask and ensure no one is around and will stay away from the area I have been in for as long as possible.

The virus is spread in droplets from the respiratory tract which are expelled if you cough or sneeze. The droplets hang around the air for possibly 24 hours. The house is well ventilated but it is cold outside. I don't really notice this. Before I leave the bathroom to return to my bedroom I wipe clean all the hard surfaces including the handles on the doors. The virus can remain on hard surfaces for at least 42 possibly 72 hours. I make sure that I have closed the door behind me. No one is allowed, following the guidance from NHS inform (“stay at home” advice if you have symptoms) from going in that room and in my room. Two or three times a day I go down into the kitchen, again trying to fit in the logistics of no one being around for some time before and after I leave my room and then again before and after I enter and leave the kitchen. I

have to eat all my meals in my room. I have no appetite. I keep all the dishes, cups, glasses I have used during the day in my room until I can take them down myself, wash them thoroughly, and put them in a different compartment in the dishwasher. Any towels or a dishcloth or oven gloves I use cannot be used by anyone else. I am, maybe 15 minutes in the kitchen doing this and putting my washing in the washing machine. The effort of having to complete these essential tasks at a time that I feel most energised saps all my energy.

The first three days I would just return to my room and sleep. Yesterday I spent some time in the garden and how I cherished it. Feeling the sun beating on my face sitting on a garden bench in the fresh air listening to the birds was such a pleasure. I realise how lucky I was to have that garden space. In my room in the mornings I see the sun stream through the gaps in the curtains. When I open the curtain and look out the world seems an unreal distant place and incredibly beautiful...the bright yellow daffodils and forsythia just blossoming in the garden are pretty and cheering, the new life of Spring. Looking out the window facing the road and the front of the house I watch for people. There are very few around and I watch as they pass each other on the street, turning their heads away from each other and making sure that the distances between them are at least 2 m. I watched the Watson's children go to school yesterday and return home again, listening to the chatter of their voices soon to be silenced for goodness knows how long. A friend kindly dropped in some provisions for us. To shop online we would have to wait till the middle of April for delivery. I asked her to let us know when she came, so we could collect them, from the front door when she was gone and not leave it there for the birds or the cat or the fox to steal. She did this but I had my phone switched off. She rang the bell. I leapt out of bed to make certain that the door was not answered until she was out of harms way. I then went to my window to wave at her. That first human "contact" with the outside world was I have to say a very poignant moment. I waved to her and her husband from my room and smiled and wept. I watched them leave.

It is odd the way I feel, happy and blessed yet incredibly weary and exhausted. I am constantly nervous about my breathing although it is absolutely fine and my oxygen saturation levels are regularly 99% which is excellent. But I imagine that my lungs are tight I imagine I have got chest pain. I want to talk to people I know I can, but I feel too tired to hold the phone

for any length of time. In bed I clutch Rosary beads, given to me by a friend, a tiny cross given to me by a friend, and my inhaler. I leave the phone switched off under my pillow I have no idea why. Day 8 Thought for the day - Today I am feeling stronger. On waking this morning these were my thoughts. I am grateful for my life, for the comfort of my room, for the love, support and connected prayers of so many from all over the world, for the realisation that such uncertainty lead me so directly and immediately to seek refuge in my God, for the joy of my family for whom I wish I had spared these anxious days, for the faith and hope that all will be well in whatever shape that may take, and again for the hope that all of us may stop and think and reset our compasses to what really matters. I have learnt an enormous amount in these last few days within the confines of my room, my heart and my mind that never stills. Perhaps one day I will be able to share those lessons and help others. knowing and understanding full well that we are all different. Day 9 Today's reflection - I am now free from symptoms. I am tired physically but mentally I feel stronger. Mentally I suffered - indescribably, totally unexpectedly, and in a way I had not experienced before. I have seen and experienced tragedy not only through my work but also on a personal level at a young age, seen suffering, illness, children dying and yet always found ways of dealing with this usually through my faith and prayer and through human relationship. I have been stunned by how my mind seemed completely out of control, unable to focus, unable to rationalise, and unable to pray. The sheer physical impact paralysed the control I had over my thoughts. I felt too tired to put into place all my usual grounding techniques like praying, meditation, mindfulness, distracting methods, even simple breathing. For the first 2 days I was too tired to even put on a CD, using the player I luckily had in my bedroom. And I cried. I cried a lot. I cried for fear, for my family, for the loss of control, for that feeling of suffocating, for knowing I could not have any direct contact or closeness with anyone, no nurse, no one, not even my spouse. Now that that has passed thanks to so many who rallied around my bedside, virtually speaking, I spare a thought for all those who in their everyday normal lives have no space in which to social distance, who have no home to "stay at home", who have no one who seems to care for them...and there are too many of them.

We as a society must tackle this and all of us do our bit in our own ways. I ask you to take care. I pray things will settle. My son a doctor is working as a volunteer in one of the Covid 19 hubs as well as continuing his usual GP work. His wife is also working as a GP. Other

members of the family may voluntarily work as part of the NHS family. How wonderful for us all to have the opportunity to become part of a big family and to feel supported by this family...is that not what we have missed over these years! Please a prayer for all of them and for their families. Many thanks for all your prayers and support for me, grasping and coming to terms with my own vulnerability...and is that such a bad thing? Day 10 - At last! It is amazing how all the simple things we take for granted and almost resent because they seem mundane and time wasters become such a joy and treasure and feel like great achievements when you have not been able to do them for a while! Responses to "so what did you do today" may go like this for me. I got up, I showered and washed my hair and how good that felt. I went downstairs relaxed, with no gloves or masks, felt the freedom of moving around my own house, I ate porridge, drank coffee, and savoured them — delicious. The ultimate joy - I, sat beside and close to my husband, saw and conversed with 3 of my 4 sons and 3 grandsons from Perth, Australia, London, and Surrey. We laughed and chatted and were in awe at how technology could bring us all together at the same time from all the corners of the world. Then the sheer exhilaration of actually going outside! The outing was wonderful but still nerve wracking, I jumped every time I saw anyone, ensuring a wide berth. There is no way you can fulfil the 2 metre gap requirement on a narrow pavement so I would either walk in the middle of the road, risking my life, or dart into the closest garden, alleyway or shop portico and wait till they passed. I so hope I can get antibody testing to confirm the infection so that I can start to relax, to ensure I will be safe when I return to work and that I pose no risk to my husband or anyone else. I have joined the great British home choir, spent time on the computer, watched a bit of TV...and that is how I spent my exciting day! A massive achievement...and I gave huge thanks for it. Two additional positives today. All NHS Lothian healthcare workers who show signs of Covid 19 or who are having to self isolate because a member of the family may have it, will be eligible for the testing. Just one day too late for me but I am delighted for my colleagues and the present depleted workforce. Tonight at 8.00 pm the nation was called to applaud all NHS carers. A colleague commented "I have just witnessed the clap in Morningside! Lots of whoops and cheers and clapping. There were Church bells ringing! It was very touching to know that there is such appreciation of what we are trying to do. Something to remember in the gratitude diary!"

In the next few days as I regain my strength I shall record many more positives I am sure. Examples would include how people expressed their love and care, from all over the world, from Canada to New Zealand to Hong Kong, family in India all with their own problems, held out their arms and their hearts to me and embraced me. Prayers in abundance from everyone of different religions, Christian, Hindu, Muslim and of no religion. A letter I whilst sent pleading with a senior member of the NHS to supply PPE and testing was responded to with warmth and thanks and signed “with best wishes and NHS love”! At last....

Rita Rigg has been a GP in Edinburgh since 1995. Over the past year Dr Rigg has been working in the COVID triage hub providing the first point of contact for doctor advice for all people in Edinburgh and the Lothians (>800000 people) with suspected or confirmed COVID. She continues in her role as an appraiser and a tutor for medical students at the University of Edinburgh.