



Covid pandemic remembered: 'Every day was scary'

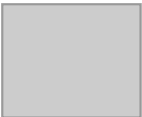
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Covid pandemic remembered: 'Every day was scary'

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The last time I met Laura Blackmore, I could only see her eyes. The rest of her face was hidden behind a mask, her words muffled behind the steamed-up visor.

It was five years ago, as the first wave of Covid hit St George's Hospital in Tooting, south London. She'd just been redeployed to one of the new intensive care units set up to deal with the overwhelming demand.

This time around I can see her face and hear her words much more clearly. There's no mask, no visor – but there are some very tough memories of March 2020 and what followed.

“Obviously, I was really scared because we'd had no training at the time, whereas usually there's a whole programme before you join intensive care. It was really nerve-wracking” – she pauses as she reflects – “I'd never seen so many patient deaths before. I can remember most of the patients, I can remember their faces.” She pauses again.

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“I used to come into work one day and it would be one set of patients, then I'd come in the next day and it would be a completely different set of patients... and it wasn't because they were getting better.”

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Five years on, Laura, who is now 28 and a ward manager on the Rodney Smith Ward at St George's, has had plenty of time to reflect on her Covid experiences.

“So it was scary – every day was scary. I remember having the visor and mask on, and I could just hear my own breath.

“It was like when you're scuba diving and you can just hear your own breath over anything else and that's what it was like every day when you'd gown up outside the bays.” Laura pauses again. “But... I mean, yeah... it was... it was one of the hardest times of my life for sure.”

The experiences in the first wave of Covid were bad enough but a second wave was to follow.

“At the time I did have staff support through the hospital which did help – just someone to vent and cry to – I just remember crying in my first session the whole way through. I didn't... I didn't know how to express what I'd been through because it was so difficult.”

Laura adds: “You know, everyone had a family member, a friend or someone in their personal life that was going through something to do with Covid. So it was hard to then come home and tell them about all the horrific things you'd been seeing at work.”

She says she had a lot of support at home from her parents, and from her friends, but that her colleagues who experienced similar things are the ones who helped her through the most – then and now.

Laura did have to take time off work to deal with what she'd been through, but has used her experiences to help staff in her new role as ward manager – telling them it's "OK not to be OK", encouraging them to talk, to share.

It's clear though, I say to her, that Covid has never really left her.

"Yeah, 100%. I tried to watch a couple of programmes about Covid, and I just can't watch them at all – it brings all the emotions back – things like the noises, the sounds.

"I can't go over to the wards I was on then. The smells over there and the wards bring everything back and I never thought it would have that effect. Yeah, I definitely still struggle with it and I think about that time all the time."

Dr Nirav Shah, who is now the hospital's clinical director for adult critical care, was also at St George's five years ago as the first wave struck.

"We changed everything," he says. The hospital went from about 60 intensive care beds to around 120 at the peak. At one stage there were about 700 patients in the hospital with Covid.

"There was a lot more death," he remembers.

"It was also the manner of the deaths. If someone is going to die, we aim to give them a good death. We aim to give them time, we like to make sure family are with them and we can support the family through that period but that was just impossible, particularly in the first wave of Covid – it was so difficult."

But Covid brought lessons, such as new ways to care for patients. Hospitals learned how to work more closely together, to share the overwhelming workload.

One example Nirav points to is the new ACCESS system – developed during the pandemic to move critically ill patients between hospitals. It has just completed its 3,000th patient journey in the past three years.

When I ask respiratory consultant Dr Jane Evans for her memories, she pauses – like many of the staff BBC London spoke to – because there are mixed memories. Thoughts of the courage shown, the teamwork, the dedication, the exhaustion and the tears.

"A lot of us felt lucky," she says. "We were able to come to work, we were able to feel that we were doing something. But that didn't detract from how difficult it was to see people get sick."

On one afternoon, she says nine of her patients died.

"We saw our colleagues get sick, we saw our friends and family get sick. Some people lost friends and family through this time... and that was really tough. So I think it shows just how the NHS did pull together and did some really amazing things really quickly."

She adds: "There's a hidden part to it as well – for example, there have been a few television programmes that have highlighted or dramatised the world of Covid, and I think for a lot of us, we've

watched the first few minutes of those and thought: ‘No, it’s too quick’... it’s too soon for us to see that because it brings back things that perhaps we’ve buried and forgotten.”

“You too?”, I ask.

“Yeah, I definitely started to watch one of them, I can’t remember which, and thought: ‘No, I’m not ready for this yet.’”

With St George’s – like most London hospitals – still incredibly busy, staff like Jane don’t get that much time to look back to Covid. Some still don’t like to.

But I ask her for her overriding memories.

“I think it’s a really mixed bag... you know. The first and foremost is how amazingly well the NHS, which was already struggling, coped. But, in the background you can’t help but also look at the negatives – you sometimes learn more from the things that don’t go so well or that you get wrong.

“You know, were we to face another pandemic today would we be better prepared.?... I’m not sure.

Would it be any easier for anyone? I don’t think so. Would our NHS cope with another onslaught? I’m not sure we would, actually. So it’s a real mixed bag of feelings about it: a sense of pride but also a sense of real foreboding.”

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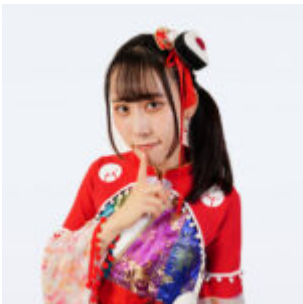
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Date Created

March 17, 2025

Author

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