

## **Experience as an NHS Healthcare professional working on the frontline during the COVID-19 Pandemic – Lessons for a Lifetime!**

*'We are facing a human crisis unlike any we have experienced' and our 'social fabric and cohesion is under stress'*

- Amina J Mohammad  
Deputy Secretary General, UN  
April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020

On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the on-going Coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) - which had already caused a lot of panic among people and disrupted healthcare systems - as a global pandemic. Moving to Oxford just a month ago to hone my skills in musculoskeletal oncology, reality took a sharp turn when the pandemic starting spreading across UK. What was usually news on TV or a pop-up notification on your mobile was a crisis staring right at your face. Being in an Oncology service, it was essential for all associated healthcare professionals to work on the frontline even during these unprecedented times to provide an unhindered service as delaying treatment to cancer patients would be detrimental to their survival. **'Be Positive, Test Negative'** – this was the tagline which was suggested by one of our senior colleagues which would bind all our plans together. The entire unit was re-structured to decrease unnecessary patient attendance to hospital, personal protection equipment (PPE) was used at all times and social distancing was the norm at the hospital. Exemplary leadership and teamwork skills displayed by seniors trickled down and soon the entire team got organised to provide a near routine service to sarcoma patients. Sharing positive stories, supporting and motivating each other, 'elbow-fives' after each surgery and staying together (yet 2-metres apart!) gave positive vibes and went a long way in pushing us forward. Working to work amidst empty roads, the pandemic was a great example as to how uncertain things are around us and how quickly things can change as only a month back, the Oxford book festival had so much festivity across the city. One of our cancer patients – a 98 year old World War II veteran – described the pandemic as worse than the war as even the churches were closed now, which was not the case even during the peak of the war in early 1940s. Patients were thankful to all professionals involved in their care and working on the frontline taught us how 'dying' took a new meaning suddenly. Loved ones could not bid goodbye to those who passed away and it tore our hearts to deal with the grim reality. Public was amazing in encouraging and thanking the NHS with signboards and paintings outside homes and on window panes (Fig 1). The '8 pm clap' on Thursday nights appreciating the NHS was a small and wonderful

gesture that pushed us a long way during these trying times. People always knew how to make us feel better without even us telling. Every day we came back from wards brimming with patients and their struggles to a room full of warm food that immediately felt like a big hug. It was heartening to see senior anaesthetists, surgeons and nurses – in their 70s – defying the recommendations for their age of and working tirelessly on the frontline.

As we wade through the pandemic, if there was a singular lesson I learnt from my experience on the frontline, it was **‘Gratitude’**! Being thankful for every moment and being thankful for just being on the other, if I may say safer side of the battleground. Staying together and motivating each other in the team every moment and everyday are invaluable life lessons which I have experienced. I feel honoured to be one among thousands of healthcare professionals across the globe who has worked tirelessly overcoming many hardships and also risking their lives while ensuring their patients are given the best possible care. I am confident that a year from now, when we all look back on this time, we will be able to take pride in how we looked out for one another and came through together against COVID-19. As Winston Churchill had said during one of his popular speeches – *‘These are not ‘dark’ times but ‘stern’ times’* – we need to stay strong and eventually we will overcome this temporary setback – Together !

#### Author Details with Designation



**Fig 1:** Appreciation towards NHS staff shown by the public