

Doing the day's work well:

my unlikely COVID-19 renaissance

Practising medicine was wearing me out. Trapped under referrals, late to collect children, a witness to patients' unsolvable tragedies, and angered by poor funding, I had begun to question whether this was still my life's work. Was I flogging a dead horse and holding on to capability and ideals that were no longer mine? I would fall asleep exhausted by analysis, praying for a renaissance of thought. Mine came in the most unexpected of ways.

It all began with a throat tickle. The kind that one would 'suck up' and ignore as a junior doctor, don a scarf and get on with as a mum on the school run, grab a hot drink to get through surgery as a GP. As the day ended however, the tickle had turned into a cough. It was mid-March. COVID-19 had moved from a distant, improbable occurrence to the forefront of my mind and after hearing the Prime Minister's new guidance, I called work explaining why I couldn't be on call or even go in. 'I'm sure it's just an URTI but ...' I felt familiar waves of guilt at letting colleagues down, I hoped it would just fade away.

ISOLATION

It didn't. My symptoms developed, I found myself a member of the 'unconfirmed but very likely coronavirus' crew. Self isolation was the first experience. 'You can talk to Mummy, we can read stories but you can't come close'. I tried to smile from my doorway into the curious eyes of my 2, 5, and 7 year olds standing behind a self-created barrier. They tried and even understood until bedtime. My heart shattered against cries of 'Please! I just need a cuddle from Mummy!' I rechecked my temperature at 38.6 degrees, and sank into a tear-stained pillow.

There were more like me. Unwell doctors found new ways of caring, for ourselves and others. We existed on social media



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support groups and signed petitions, over-analysed symptoms and dreamt of knowing our formal immune status to better care for patients and our families. We worried at how much of our workforce would be rendered paralysed in this no man's land. We became living examples of 'physician heal thyself'.

Bred to help others but physically incapacitated and witnessing a war zone. We swapped tips, 'Why am I still exhausted?' 'When should we really get back to work?' As days passed, we heard local stories of coughs, ventilation, death, and extreme vulnerability, and began to sense how lucky we were.

WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION

There was new heartbreak, mixed with anger and pride, for the selfless care of unprotected colleagues who had held their vocation sacred enough to sacrifice their lives. Our crippled NHS rose in public regard. As my children and I clapped from our door at the bravery of colleagues, I had the opportunity to explain the core of selflessness that exists in a health professional or public worker. Few choose a job in health care for wages, it is the instinctive call to try and help that speaks

loudest. I first recognised this in my own parents and heard it loudest while away from work.

I marvelled at my children's cheerful adaptability to my isolation. We made up stories, wrote love notes, and created new avenues of communication. At the same time GP practices were doing the same, shifting to phone consultations and remote consulting, learning about foodbanks and writing documents to protect the vulnerable. The workplace I would return to was transforming.

As spring came into bloom my symptoms passed, and so, I realised, had my apathy towards my job. The very opportunity to go to work and the sense of purpose that it brings felt like a blessing in these unpredictable times. Work has made the world outside lockdown real, allowing me to enter it and be humbled by its stories of strength and tragedy.

Even amidst great uncertainty, there is enough to sustain me and help me grow. With the passing of each day comes a story and a sense of 'mindfulness' unique to this path, brilliantly summarised by Sir William Osler (1849-1919):

'Throw away all ambition beyond that of doing the day's work well.

The travellers on the road to success live in the present, heedless of taking thought for the morrow.

Live neither in the past nor in the future, but let each day's work absorb your entire energies and satisfy your wildest ambition.'

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