A pandemic was declared in March 2020, due to a novel virus, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It was initially reported that COVID-19 infection could cause dramatic variation in clinical outcome, from asymptomatic infection through to multi-organ failure and death. Early data reported that 17% of people hospitalised due to COVID-19 would require intensive care, and 32% of these people would die.\(^1\)\(^2\) Nationally, and internationally, planning focused on identifying and managing the very sick, and reducing people’s exposure to the virus. In primary care, in the UK, there was a move to remote consulting, with the majority of consultations being conducted by telephone or video, and face-to-face consultations being in the minority for the first time in the history of the NHS.\(^3\) The prominence of NHS 111 to differentiate between the ‘sick’ and ‘not sick’, and setting up ‘hot hubs’ for assessment of people suspected of having COVID-19 in the community, changed the face of primary care.\(^4\)

**WITNESSING THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW DISEASE**

It became clear, however, that the perception that people either die, get admitted to hospital, or recover after 2 weeks was wrong, and that people were continuing to experience persistent symptoms despite apparently mild acute symptoms. Clinicians in primary care, consulting virtually, were hearing narratives from patients who described persistent problems, such as chest pain, palpitations, shortness of breath, fatigue, ‘brain fog’, odd rashes, and loose stools. People with these symptoms, however, were rarely offered a face-to-face appointment with a GP, often spoke to a number of different GPs, and were distressed to find that GPs were as baffled as they were.\(^5\) Remote consulting added to the delay in recognition that persistent symptoms were not rare. Some people with ongoing symptoms took to the media (mainstream and social) to describe their problems,\(^6\)\(^7\) and to raise awareness of persistent symptoms.\(^8\)

"[Primary care clinicians were] witnessing the emergence of a new disease ... [and] were initially working in an evidence-free zone ... "

which came to be labelled as ‘long COVID’ by patients themselves.\(^9\)

Primary care clinicians were initially working in an evidence-free zone, but gradually key primary care researchers published helpful guidance,\(^10\) with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence scoping guidance published in October 2020,\(^11\) and full guidance in December 2020.\(^12\) The latter not using the patient-preferred term ‘long-COVID’, rather using ‘post COVID-19 syndrome’, to describe symptoms persisting after 12 weeks. Some people with persisting symptoms were not happy with this new label.\(^1\)\(^3\) A National Institute for Health Research themed review\(^13\) emphasised the fluctuating and multi-system symptoms, and suggested that there was a need for ‘one-stop shop’ clinics to offer assessment and investigation for people with long COVID.

**FINDING THE ‘RIGHT’ GP**

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) published guidance,\(^14\) which included ‘top tips’ for clinicians — the first of which emphasised the need for the patient to be believed, that their symptoms are taken seriously and not dismissed as due to ‘anxiety’, and the importance of finding the ‘right’ GP.\(^5\) Primary care clinicians were initially working in an evidence-free zone, but gradually key primary care researchers published helpful guidance,\(^10\) with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence scoping guidance published in October 2020,\(^11\) and full guidance in December 2020.\(^12\) The latter not using the patient-preferred term ‘long-COVID’, rather using ‘post COVID-19 syndrome’, to describe symptoms persisting after 12 weeks. Some people with persisting symptoms were not happy with this new label.\(^1\)\(^3\) A National Institute for Health Research themed review\(^13\) emphasised the fluctuating and multi-system symptoms, and suggested that there was a need for ‘one-stop shop’ clinics to offer assessment and investigation for people with long COVID.

The RCGP also developed an online learning module, made free to non-members, which emphasised the priority the RCGP gives to this topic, and the RCGP presented evidence to the House of Lords report.\(^15\)

The NHS released the ‘Your COVID recovery’ website (https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk) and announced investment in services for people with persisting symptoms.\(^16\) At the time of writing this editorial, we are far from seeing long COVID clinics in every locality. Some people with long COVID, with the financial means to do so, have sought private or complementary therapies.\(^17\) Such help-seeking may be the result of people feeling desperate and frustrated that the NHS (and GPs in particular) does not seem able to help.\(^5\)

Management of people with long COVID is the responsibility of general practice. People with persistent symptoms have had to become experts in their symptoms and impact, and GPs may only know as much as their patients can share with them, given the rapidly emerging evidence-base.

**IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTOR–PATIENT RELATIONSHIP**

One of the RCGP’s current priorities is ‘relationship-based care’,\(^18\) and the patient–doctor relationship is vital in the management of people with long COVID. GPs need to listen to people with persisting symptoms following acute-COVID infection, offer empathy and support, and most importantly, help them to navigate the developing referral pathways — acknowledging that currently this may involve referrals to different specialties. The GP must support the patient, and their families, in ‘putting it all together’.

There have been attempts in the media to link long COVID with chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME)\(^19\) or post-viral fatigue; however, this linkage has the potential to leave persistent symptoms uninvestigated and may be potentially harmful to patients.\(^17\) Certainly long COVID is currently unexplained, but organic pathology must be excluded before a plan for rehabilitation is suggested to the person living with symptoms.\(^20\) So the questions remain for GPs: ‘how am I going to differentiate long COVID from other complex symptoms?’, and what resources are available for me to refer patients with long COVID to? There is a need to translate the NICE guidance\(^12\) into services for people with persistent symptoms.
symptoms. This will require investment in
UK-wide community diagnostics, access to
therapies, such as physiotherapy, psychology
(including Improving Access to Psychological
Therapies services2), occupational therapy,
and specialist rehabilitation, and organised
as an integrated offer for patients. Investment
and commitment, however, is also needed
by practices to ensure that we can offer
continuity of care, recognising the value of
the patient–doctor relationship in the delivery of
high-quality, safe, care.

Helen Atherton,
Expert by experience; Associate Professor, Primary
Care Research, Social Science and Systems in
Health, Warwick Medical School, University of
Warwick, Coventry.

Tracy Briggs,
Expert by experience; Senior Lecturer and Honorary
Consultant in Genomic Medicine, Division of Evolution
and Genomic Sciences, School of Biological Sciences,
University of Manchester, Manchester.

Carolyn Chew-Graham,
GP Principal, Manchester; Professor of General
Practice Research, School of Medicine, Keele
University, Keele.

Provenance
Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Competing interests
The authors have declared no competing interests.

Acknowledgements
We wish to acknowledge people with long COVID
who participated in interviews in a qualitative
study; colleagues Kate O’Donnell, David Blane,
Tom Kingstone, and Anna Taylor; and the many
people with long-COVID who we have spoken with
over the past 9 months.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp21X714641

REFERENCES
1. UK Government. Coronavirus (COVID-19) in
Features of 20 133 UK patients in hospital
with covid-19 using the ISARIC WHO Clinical
Characterisation Protocol: prospective
observational cohort study. BMJ 2020; 369:
m1895.
3. NHS England and NHS Improvement. Advice
on how to establish a remote ‘total triage’
model in general practice using online
consultations. London: NHS England and
change the face of general practice forever.
BMJ 2020; 369: m1279.
Finding the ‘right’ GP: a qualitative study of
the experiences of people with long-COVID.
BJGP Open 2020. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3399/
bjgopen20X101143.
6. Harding L. ‘It feels endless’: four women
struggling to recover from Covid-19.
theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/07/it-feels-
endless-four-women-struggling-to-recover-
from-covid-19-coronavirus-symptoms
7. Campbell J. Fears over thousands of ‘long
haul’ Covid-19 sufferers. The Scotsman 2020;
Jun 15: https://www.scotsman.com/regions/
fears-over-thousands-long-haul-covid-19
-sufferers-2884703 [accessed 11 Jan 2021].
doctors as patients: a manifesto for tackling
370: m3565.
need to keep using the patient- made- term
brm/2020/10/31/why-we-need-to-keep-using-
the-patient-made-term-long-covid
Management of post-acute covid-19 in
11. National Institute for Health and Care
Excellence (NICE), Scottish Intercollegiate
Guidelines Network, Royal College of General
Practitioners (RCGP). COVID-19 guidance
scope: management of the long-term effects
12. NICE. COVID-19 rapid guideline: managing
the long-term effects of COVID-19. NG188.
Living with COVID: NIHR publishes dynamic
themed review into ‘ongoing COVID’. London:
14. RCGP. Management of the long term effects
15. RCGP. Royal College of General Practitioners
— written evidence (COV0051). London: UK
16. NHS Digital. NHS launches 40 ‘long COVID’
clinics to tackle persistent symptoms.
looking glass: post-viral syndrome post
COVID-19. Med Hypotheses 2020; 144:
110055.
18. RCGP. Policy and campaigning priorities
long-covid syndromes, and ME/CFS.
COVID-19 acute phase and post acute
follow-up and care: findings of a national
21. NHS Digital. Adult Improving Access to
Psychological Therapies programme. London:
NHS Digital.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE
Carolyn Chew-Graham
Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK.
Email: c.a.chew-graham@keele.ac.uk