

# Despite coronavirus, general practice is still the best job in the world

It has been a long day. Another long day. But as I write, I'm conscious of the many intensive care and hospital staff whose days will likely have seemed even longer. It does strange things to time this pandemic, doesn't it?

Who would have thought that a day could have been filled with so many interminable minutes that somehow pass in a flash, leading to the next endless day?

Minutes of home schooling, battling to understand the practice of phonics, the minefield of maths while simultaneously planning dinner, the weekly shop, arranging work meetings, answering emails — a desperate juggling act.

Minutes of online meetings, staring numbly at a screen. Staring at grids of faces that lack the 'humanness' of people you know. No smell, no touch, no presence. And all too frequently you have to hold in the ever-shortening fuse of frustration and remind them to 'unmute'.

### LONELINESS

Minutes of tears as children fold, missing friends, school, daily routines, anxious about an overheard headline: 'One hundred thousand dead.' 'Hospitals overwhelmed.' 'Unemployment soaring.' Perhaps that is why Mummy cries? Why Daddy shouts? Why the cat hides and Granny doesn't see us anymore? It has been so long since we felt the touch of her wrinkly, crinkled old hand.

Twenty precious minutes that stretch out endlessly at funerals before suddenly vanishing. The connection dies and the coffin has gone. One more to add to the newsreader's tally. A daily ritual, solemnly pronounced as though thousands of dead could be meaningful; could illustrate a wealth of stories and lives and families rather than just the statistical score to which we have all become somewhat immune.

Minutes spent tossing and turning in empty nights when the suffocating pointlessness draws in, and the heap of



empty wine bottles piled guiltily in the recycling box betray your attempts to escape. Above all, interminable minutes of loneliness.

### HOPE ON THE HORIZON

Yes, it has been a long day. These stories and more have poured into my phone: monosyllabic adolescents struggling to express their anxiety and their worried parents who need you to 'do something'; harried mothers or fathers, desperately trying to maintain normality in the face of insecure jobs and finances; voiceless healthcare workers who can't express what they've seen or the impact it's had; patients with diabetes or hypertension who phone with fear in their voice to tell you of their new cough; 'long COVID' sufferers banished into the Kingdom of the Sick and those with 'short COVID' desperate to avoid it.

And beneath everything rumbles the deep, incessant hope of the vaccines and the unspoken expectation that somehow we will make everything right again, make it 'normal'.

GPs are rarely acute life savers — preventative medicine saves many. We do not ventilate people or prone them. We do not wield oxygen or steroids. Nor, thankfully, do we call relatives to tell them their loved one will die without saying goodbye. However, we do bear witness to lives. We call after the funeral to 'see how

you're doing.' We hear the stories of stress and anxiety, of homelessness or hunger, of frustrated hopes and dreams. Often, we do little but listen.

We too must deal with pain. The pain of disruption. The painful challenge of remote conversations that destroy our patient's faces, their warm smiles and friendly touch, leaving us with vague memories and disembodied voices. Coldly banished to isolated hours of loneliness, alone in a room we make painful call after painful call. Rarely is there a moment of hope or good news. Rather the minutes are filled with angst and fear.

In the midst of bleakness, the vaccine rollout has been a beacon. Gratitude, pleasure, and overwhelming relief have suddenly displaced fear and frustration. It has been hard on top of 'business as usual'. Weekends, evenings, extra, hidden hours have been filled with endless injections. But every minute worth it for the smiles we see despite the facemasks. Perhaps primary care will after all become one of the pandemic's heroes, the restorers of 'normality' — or we may be thwarted by another mutated strain.

Whatever happens, we will still be here. We will still be listening; still validating lives. And perhaps that is the most anyone can ever do.

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