



Work in the time of COVID-19

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We keep being told these are unprecedented times, that everyone's world has changed and that there is a "new normal".

This is an account of my personal experience of life during "lockdown". I know a lot of my locum colleagues are having problems finding work, as their regular practices stopped using them. I also know a lot of my colleges applied for work in 'Covid clinics', OOH and emergency clinics instead. We were aware this virus was in the UK as early as February, but I can honestly say that my work didn't change, and in fact life didn't change for at least another month. We heard the news reports, we worried, but we were reassured that all was in hand. The UK was prepared... until it wasn't. Little did I know Covid19 would affect not just my work, but my health too.

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Some of you may know that I developed symptoms and ended up being off work for over three weeks. It started with the bone-weary fatigue, and body ache before developing into a fever two days later. Complying with guidelines I self-isolated. I felt guilty, as at the time, I felt well enough to work; I have definitely been into work previously feeling worse than this! However, this was just the beginning. Within days I had the cough, breathlessness, throbbing headaches, cramps and diarrhoea. I lost my sense of smell and taste. Testing has been hit and miss despite what the government said; access seemed to depend on your postcode and your manager. Testing was arranged despite me not fitting the 5-day time frame and I had to drive myself 20mins to the testing site. It was after this I deteriorated and at one point when my sats dropped to 90% with a tachycardia of 180, I thought it was time to call 111.

I was worried about worrying my family, I was feeling guilty about using NHS resources and feeling guilty about my colleagues having to pick up my workload. I am fortunate that I am relatively young and relatively fit and within 24hr I had picked up, but it would take weeks to recover. I lost weight, my stamina was shot and my taste is still altered today. I did eventually tell my family and friends how unwell I had been, after the event! I can honestly say I have never felt so unwell, especially for such a prolonged time, but I have very little to compare this too. I've never had flu and the closest I probably come to this is an episode of quinsy. This I think has coloured my view of the "lockdown" world.

I started working as a locum in Manchester in February 2020 and had only been at my current practice since the beginning of March. Prior to the government's restrictions on March 23rd, I can honestly say the day-to-day running of the surgery didn't change. So like most GPs prior to lockdown, we had full clinics, mostly face to face, with no triage beforehand and added in extras and calls as needed. We only altered from face to face consultations on the 16th March, (the week before I became ill) but even then, triage only consisted of asking them if they were symptomatic. Then in the space of a week everything changed and we were playing catch up. Processes that would normally have taken months to implement, were put into practice within weeks. We were firefighting initially. Most of the changes happened whilst I was off ill, so I had to play catch up on my return; but I was so grateful to be back at work and able to contribute. GP surgeries have remained open throughout all of this; ok our front doors are locked, but we are still doing the same amounts of consultati-

-ons each day, if not more. I know we struggled as advice from up high was either non-existent, contradictory, unsuitable, or constantly changing! Don't even get me started on PPE supplies! But we struggled through. Hot hubs were introduced, visiting services were put in place, and teams to certify the increasing number of deaths in the community were put together (yes mainly in nursing and residential homes). The way we did things changed overnight. Social distancing has been introduced at work, and changes are still being made every day, although some would say too late. These are proving to be interesting times.

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Remote working has plenty of technical issues. Access to practice computers is non-existence for us, so we were given readers to attach to our home computers. We didn't have enough of these to start with. Remote access software has its own difficulties and I still only have intermittent access eight weeks later, meaning I cannot remote work safely. Video consultations still has ongoing IT issues and the sheer number of daily phone consultations has overwhelmed the system. We have just introduced e-consultations to add to the ways patients can access us. Yet despite all this I worry about the ongoing health concerns of my patients, both the physical and the emotional needs that were there before the Covid crisis and those brought on by the Covid crisis. I'm dealing with more mental health issues daily, and having to signpost more and more to online services. I worry I'm not seeing the serious illnesses I should be seeing daily, and how much we are storing for the future. I worry I haven't admitted anyone acutely unwell in months. I worry about the number of patients that need routine secondary care referrals that are on hold. And I worry about the long-term effects this will have on my mental, emotional and psychological health. I am changed. We are a work in progress with ongoing daily frustrations, but we have proved we can adapt and that there will be lasting change in the GP landscape and a "new normal".