

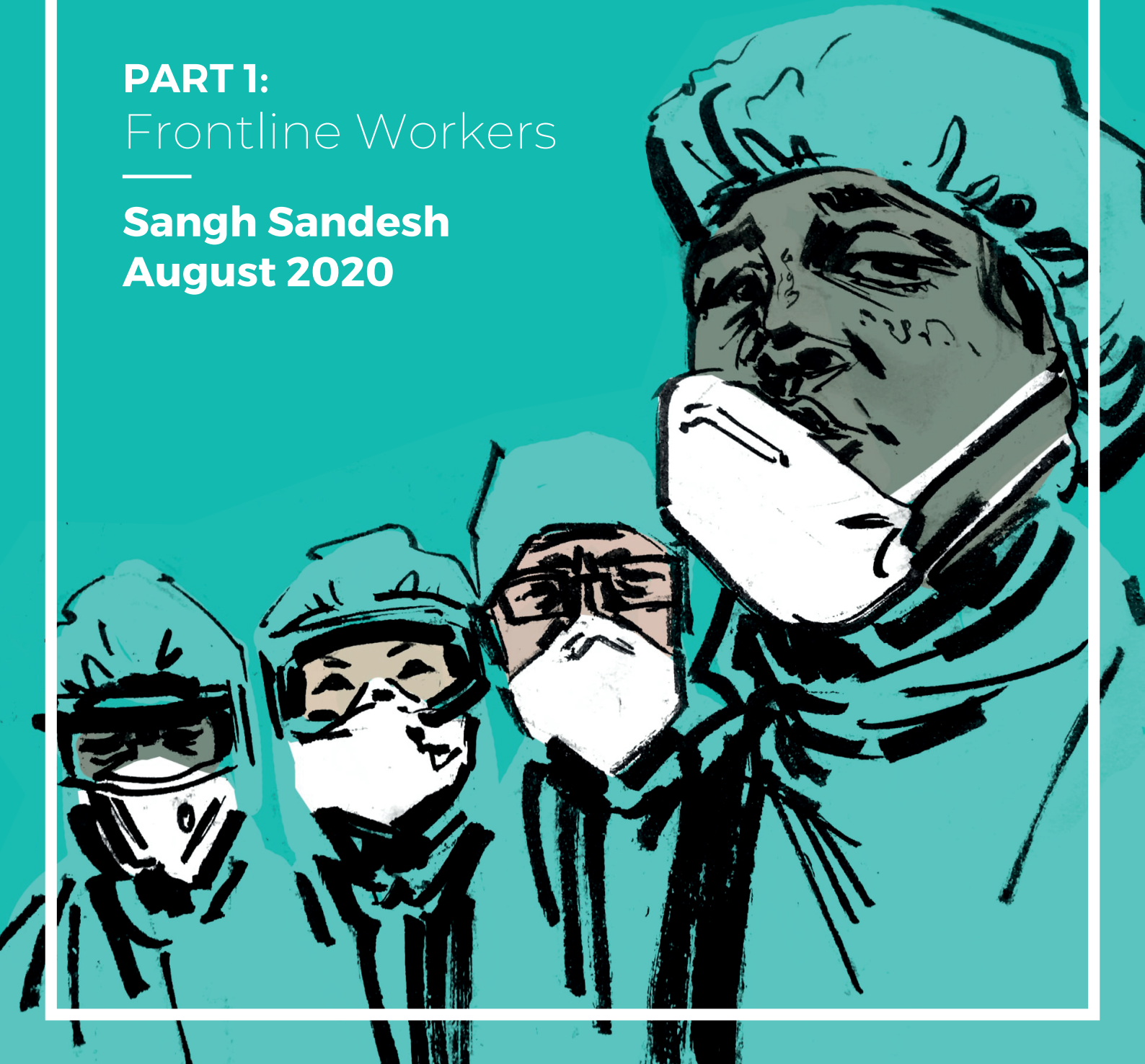


Unsung Heroes:

Overcoming Adversity During A Crisis

PART 1:
Frontline Workers

Sangh Sandesh
August 2020



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Unsung Heroes: Overcoming Adversity During A Crisis

FRONTLINE WORKERS



healthy. Nothing in the world of COVID-19, however, is so simple: “It became obvious with the numbers of predicted patients that the respiratory physician team alone would not be enough to look after these patients; we were expecting far too many for just the six of us to manage.” The nature of the uphill task before them was as clear as day.

Our conversation turns to some of the challenges that doctors in her role are facing. Whilst many of us are keeping safe from the virus in the cocoon of our own homes, doctors have no such luxury.

**“We were all dealing
with our own anxiety that
we would get infected.
We knew we would.”**

FRONTLINE WORKERS

DHARMA AND SEWA ON THE FRONTLINE

PRAVAR PETKAR IN CONVERSATION WITH DR NEELA SURANGE

“Namaste. Sorry I got delayed; we had an urgent departmental meeting.”

“Not to worry,” I reply. It goes without saying that our doctors are very busy these days. Dr Neela Surange is a consultant respiratory physician in Manchester, leading a team of six consultants and a few junior doctors. She normally sees hospital in-patients who tend to be very sick with breathing problems. In the COVID-19 pandemic that brings with it very serious respiratory problems, it is no surprise that her team is on the frontline.

I ask how her working role has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Everyone is looking to respiratory physicians and their intensive care colleagues at this time, since they have the skills needed to keep us all safe and

Those four words ring out in my mind, the *tyāg* that they subtly express conveyed so naturally and deeply, and only emphasised by the reality that awaited them: long days of working with patients that gave way to exhaustion, and the two days off in every six spent teaching and writing guidelines to prepare colleagues that were being redeployed from other departments. Some of us are fortunate enough to be able to view the COVID-19 crisis from the other side of a television, smartphone or computer screen.

Respiratory physicians are not amongst them: “We were living with COVID-19, thinking of COVID-19 all the time and there was no other news on the television. We were intensely focused on COVID-19 and couldn’t get away from it.”

She mentions some of the other challenges: knowing about the threat that was lying in wait, but not how to treat it, and the steep learning curve that followed. “It was the first time that we were treating a disease that we had never learnt about.” The stress that seemed to pervade everything, and the

way in which the team pulled together to support each other. The elderly patients who did not get a chance to see their relatives before they passed away; and those who understood the nature of the infection and did not want their families to come into the hospital. "It was heart-wrenching to watch them pass without their family members."

Many would wilt like a flower under the blazing heat of the sun in response to this situation. Dr Surange tells me about how she and her team managed to keep going: "It was quite nice to see the newest junior doctors have this great sense of duty. We have to do it. Nobody else is going to do this. I have got these skills which I have developed over 25 to

30 years. There are patients coming in the dozens who need doctors with these skills. It's simple, who is going to do it." I reflect on the phrase

'...if not you, then WHO?'

that I have encountered in many a bauddhik over the years; this is the mindset of coming forward to serve society in its hour of need in practice. She describes how the trust patients have in the NHS and its doctors has been a source of motivation, and one



**"We have to do it.
Nobody else is going
to do this..."**

conversation that sticks in her mind at a time when doctors were especially nervous about what was to come. One patient was telling her, “I have written and sent an email to say that I’m really pleased with your service. I had the best service from the NHS.” She says to the patient that she hopes they’ll be able to continue this. “I’m sure you’ll have the best service when COVID-19 comes along,” the patient replied.

Where does inspiration come from at these times? Dr Surange recalls a short message sent at a challenging time that summed up everything for her: be brave and do your dharma. She says, “that’s it. Dharma. That’s exactly the word for all the feelings I’m going through.” She mentions a video shared on WhatsApp around the time of Ram Navami, when there were anxieties about doctors not having enough PPE. The video talks about how Shri Ram was fighting an uneven battle but was following the right principles and she explains how this gave her direction and focus in facing the challenges before her and her team.

“It was dharma versus adharma in that battle. We had a discussion at home that this situation too was dharma vs adharma. We don’t know how the virus was formed, but if it did come from the wet market, it is the product of mindless consumption – that is not very nice. It seemed that something in the whole situation was not quite dharmic.”

She mentions too the inspiration she has drawn from those involved in sewa work alongside their day jobs at the moment, and the e-shakha bauddhiks over Zoom that talk about how sewa is fundamental to our culture; the very same sewa that doctors up and down the country are involved in for hours each day.

We turn to some reflections upon the COVID-19 pandemic as a whole and how it has affected society. On the response in the hospital, she says, “We have learnt the importance of teamwork.

In the hospital, everybody worked as a team. We had no other agendas or focus – only ‘how do we deal with this the best?’ Teamwork can achieve great things.”

Truly, this is ‘SANGATHAN MEIN SHAKTI HAI’

(in unity there is strength) in action, I think to myself. Dr Surange comments on how this present situation reminds us to appreciate the support we get from our family, to reflect on what we are consuming and reduce our food waste. I realise that COVID-19 is pulling us closer to our roots – towards a more sustainable, harmonious and compassionate way of living.

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing us all as people. It is reminding us of our eternal, universal values; of the importance of appreciating those who work hard to protect us and keep us healthy; of the need for us, in a time of crisis, to help others overcome adversity by offering our own skills and resources to meet society’s needs. That, I think, is doing our dharma.

politics". COVID-19 is piercingly different. It has the power to humble us, and unite the world. Where war is fought with Power at the core of human psyche, COVID-19 must be fought with Humility at the core of human psyche.

To be humble is not to be timid or weak. To be humble is to have the strength to let go of what no longer works

- else we'll be forced to let go. To live through COVID-19 without destroying ourselves, requires humility towards three things:- with oneself, with others and with our Earth.

FRONTLINE WORKERS

WE WILL, BUT WITH HUMILITY

COVID-19 AND ITS DISREGARD FOR OUR PETTY EGOS

RAJIV CHANDEGRA

Hands washed, apron tied, mask on and fingers stretching the nitrile gloves. This is my routine for every patient. And when the day is over, I go home, make food, watch TV and sleep. All without any meaningful physical contact with anyone. These are unreal times.

In a hundred years, we have never seen such an all-devouring menace that plagues every nook and cranny of this earth. Every nation faces impending economic collapse, disruption of civil liberties, and the rising death toll. Greta and Brexit are distant memories. COVID-19 has been as devastating as a military war. Both kill. Both destroy economies. Both lead to a whole generation of distress. But as a friend recently said, "a war divides the world and politicians will continue with their

WITH THE SELF

If you don't think life is strange at the moment, you're doing something wrong. Social distancing is the norm and it's uncomfortable. Aside from the economic and potentially unequal impact on different groups of people, our herculean conviction of "I want to live and work in this way!" collapses like a sand castle. There is a fuzzy line between convenience and compulsion. The discipline of social distancing forces one question, "must I leave my house?"

When our liberties are removed, we begin, very palpably, to feel our own compulsive behaviors. Sometimes verbalized, but mostly nagging at the rear of our heads - "I must see that person; I need to get out". Whether these activities are necessary or not, our compulsions come out with full force. Our compulsions will kill us. Only the constant voice of reason - oddly from regular televised announcements - is preventing us from enacting our compulsions.

With regard to working, businesses are suffering. Small, medium and multi-national corporations in the UK and the rest of the world have been hit. Owners, the employed and self-employed - all have seen a mega downturn. For most,

our work is just a lead indicator for material success. And why shouldn't it be? We deserve the fruits of our toil. The reality is, COVID-19 has no care for your material success. Hard times are upon us, for sure, and the poorest will suffer the most. Governments have embarked on exceptional measures to mitigate losses. But still, we find it difficult to let go of our goodies. For nothing but your own sanity, be humbled by this, and accept material loss gracefully.

WITH OTHERS

'Othering' is a phenomenon of social psychology. Through social categorisation, we box ourselves into 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'. These groups give us a sense of identity, and with identity come norms, behaviours and beliefs. With this perceived group membership, we gain self-esteem, which if left unchecked, bears the seed of stereotyping and prejudice. We are so conditioned with our group mentality, that we see 'out groups' as unfavourable and just plain wrong.

Religion and political ideologies are prime examples. The hatred exhibited, either online or in flesh, to groups that have different opinions to our own, is astonishing, yet timeless. When group identities are forged, with this crude division programmed within their operating systems, we function in different worlds. COVID-19 proclaims: "I'm blind to black, white and brown. I'm dumb to Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh or Jew. I devour both the left and the right." Temples are shut. Mosques are shut. Churches are shut. And rightly so. It is not that spirituality does not play any part, but that it should not be dependent on rigid institutions. Let them evolve beyond the rule books.

From a political standpoint, it's time to leave aside political ideologies. In his book "Broken Politics", Kishan

Bhatt warns that entrenched political ideology is breaking society and offers a useful solution. Reaching a crescendo, governments all over the world are taking unprecedented steps and pushing policies that may be seen to go against their political will.

This is refreshing.

But will nations put aside their own political wills going forward, even beyond this crisis?

We are entering a brave new world in which "big government" and international solidarity are both unavoidable.- The Politics of the Pandemic, Apr 1, 2020, Published on Project Syndicate COVID-19 lands a tough message - leave aside political ideology and staunch religiosity. These have only sought to divide the world into believers and non-believers, left-wingers and right-wingers.

Reality - and COVID-19 is the starkest reality we are dealing with - will destroy every ideology - political or religious. For the sake of others, be humbled by this.

WITH THE EARTH

Up until now, climate change has been the news-worthy global issue, popularised so vividly by Greta and the X-Rebellion. But the global climate crisis is hard to resolve. It requires an entirely different way of thinking - Systems Thinking. Problems are generally seen and solved through linear thinking. Our brains prefer clear-cut logic and hypothesise over 'if x, then y' types of solutions. Systems thinking diverges from this. Here, we are forced to assume, initially anyway, that everything is connected with everything else. Instead of looking at the world using harsh analysis, we see the world through soft synthesis.

Causality is not static. It is a dynamic, never ending feedback system, constantly evolving and emerging. This relatively modern concept of Systems Thinking, is akin to the ancient concept of Rta - or cosmic synchronicity. In the social sciences, we call this Dharma. The explanation goes, that if we understand the intimate synchronicity of everything and everyone, we'll be more mindful how we act and build society.

unbelievably interconnected, that what we choose to place on our plates and into our palates, has the possibility of sparking devastating pandemics and climate crises. It just has. COVID-19, having its birth in the wet markets of China, is just one example of pandemics born from the meat industry. Have we not yet learned this glaringly obvious secret?

At the risk of summoning this as gospel, I'd invite the reader to jump into a possibility that we live in a world that is so



FRONTLINE WORKERS

THE RE-BIRTH OF “SHRAVAN” IN OUR SOCIETY

TUSHAR SHAH

COVID-19 has changed the world we know today. Lockdown has brought the world economy, our nations, communities and lives to a standstill. It is, however, in this challenge that we have an opportunity to reflect and identify a brighter future, if only we are brave and bold enough to do so.

For those of us familiar, Shravan was a boy who dedicated his life to looking after his two elderly parents but was accidentally killed by an arrow by Rama's father, Dasharatha who mistook him for an animal whilst hunting.

I reflect on this story as a creative “synonym” as we look back over the last few months during the COVID-19 crisis. There is no doubt that the biggest victims of the catastrophe have been the elderly and more specifically, those living within care homes. This is the tragedy and burden society now has to carry as it moves forward but it has been a “white elephant” that successive governments have ignored.

Social care reform is essential if we are to truly look after elders in our community. To put this into context, the NHS has approximately 133,000 beds; care homes have 400,000 beds with a further 640,000 elderly being looked after in their own homes. However, the priority both at the beginning of the crisis as well as at the election has been the NHS.

This is not to say that the NHS is not important, but even the NHS knows that if we are to look after the elderly better, resources will need to be freed to focus on the wider priorities of the NHS to everyone's benefit. To ask a government to solve this problem is a big task and requires the collective efforts of the nation and a rethink of our moral compass in order to solve it. The hope in all of this has been beautifully illustrated by the collective response by all communities working together to overcome the challenges of COVID-19.

Before we explore the solutions to the problem we need to recognise that in all of this tragedy,

...a modern day “Shravan” has emerged and this is none other than the “care worker”.

Generally lowly paid, working unsociable hours and expected to multi-task, they have come forth with a sense of recognition of their contribution and value. Like Dasharatha's arrow killing Shravan, it has taken a crisis for society to value the dedication, compassion and skills of the humble care worker.

From our own personal experience, we have seen staff make huge sacrifices for the well being of residents, moving into the care home for 12 weeks so as to isolate and protect the residents whilst leaving their own families at home. We have seen staff being the only contact for those in isolation in their own home and being the bridge between them, their families and the wider community.

They have comforted, smiled, laughed and cried to ensure our society's elders have been looked after and cared for over the last few months. It is with such sacrifice on the front line that we are fortunate to date to be COVID-19 free for all of our customers.

However, even before the crisis, we knew the elderly in our community needed support.

Isolation and loneliness is the biggest challenge and opportunity we have.

Through our work in Sewa Day, volunteers across the country have spread joy through letters, paintings and care appreciation parcels. Such small and random acts of kindness have created a sense of purpose for both the elderly and care workers that they are being valued and not forgotten. Post COVID-19 we need to take this energy and enthusiasm to all within our community.

It is a watershed moment when for example, our mandirs can become a centre for the community to bring our elderly out of isolation and help them become a valued member of the community; a place where the young and old can sing bhajans, interact and learn about our culture and heritage; where Chair Yoga keeps our respected elders' mind, body and spirit young at heart.

I grew up in an extended family and whilst I love the gifts and memories this brought, I do also now know that I can extend my family to include the elders within my community. It is time we all looked to the lessons and values of Shravan to ensure our elderly are not forgotten and create a brighter and bolder future for them.



FRONTLINE WORKERS

THE POSTMAN IN THE PANDEMIC

PRAVAR PETKAR IN CONVERSATION
WITH ASHWIN POPAT

Whoosh! Clack! Thump!

The sound of mail being pushed through our letterbox each morning and landing sharply on the carpet below. We pick up the letters, sorting through bills, circulars and the like and go about our day without paying much more attention to it. So too in the pandemic in which we find ourselves, often passively receiving our post every morning. But have we ever thought about the person on the other side?

Ashwin Popat lives in Leicester. He's been a swayamsevak since childhood. And he's also the person on the other side of that door every morning. He is a postman; or, as we would now say, a frontline worker. Whilst many of us have sheltered inside during the lockdown period, he is outside, delivering medicines and other items that people need at home, correspondence, letters and more. When I pick up the phone to speak to him on a Bank Holiday Monday afternoon, he says,

“We need to work to serve the community at this particular time.”

Whilst the working lives of many people across the globe have shifted from hours spent in the office to Zoom calls that we can take from the comfort of our own homes with a mug of chai ready and waiting on the table in front of us, his has changed in other ways. Work starts and finishes a little later.



The red Royal Mail vans that we have seen busily roam our streets since we were children are gone; the postmen have to do their rounds by themselves so that they maintain social distancing. The need to socially distance has proved a challenge for them all, especially when sorting mail and parcels in the post room.

And what about PPE? He says: "We get gloves, hand sanitiser and a mask but only in the last four weeks. For the first two weeks, we didn't get anything as we were told that there was no supply." Delivering mail has been a strange experience too, especially when the items in question are packets, or sent by recorded or special delivery. "We have to knock at the door, step two metres back and ask if they want to receive the packet. We can't give it to them to sign so we have to sign ourselves."

I ask him how he keeps motivated through the challenges he faces at work and the additional measures he has to take every day to prevent the virus spreading to his family members. His answer comes with a crystal-clear sense of purpose:

**"Being swayamsevaks,
we know what our duty is.
Once we realise that it is
our duty, we realise it is
our dharma.**

**Are we doing this with our
whole heart?..."**

I feel I have a duty to serve the community as I am being paid for it. This work is necessary; there are lots of deliveries at the moment, as all the shops and pharmacies are closed. The packets and the parcels are like a lifeline for people at the moment." He tells me about how, despite the problems that we are facing, some good things have come out of this pandemic too: a reminder to take care of nature and the environment.

He describes how on his daily walks to deliver the post, it's peaceful when walking by the side of the road; you can hear the nice noises of birds and see animals coming out. It's easy and safe to cross the road and the air is clear. "It's a blessing in disguise," he says. As we near the end of our conversation, he offers some wider reflections on the current situation in which we find ourselves.

**"Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam [the
whole world is one family] is
coming into our real lives..."**

there are lots of neighbours ringing each other, people ringing each other to see if they are alright and people calling for help and medicines. People are helping each other out. People are living this value and providing food for other people in quarantine. Sewa Day in Leicester is collecting food for people who need it. This belief is coming true for all people, irrespective of what background we come from. You find an old diary and find numbers of people to ring; they are blessed to hear your voice and you theirs."



As I thank him for his time and push the bright red button on my smartphone screen to hang up, I feel a wave of inspiration rush over me. And I resolve that when I hear the familiar sounds of mail dropping through the letterbox tomorrow morning, I'll remind myself to think about the postmen on the other side, doing their duty to battle the COVID-19 pandemic so that our lives may continue as normal.

FRONTLINE WORKERS

COVID-19 THROUGH A PHARMACIST'S EYES

VIVEK SHAH

Coronavirus - a global pandemic; the biggest understatement.

As pharmacists on the frontline, fighting the crisis has been the most challenging obstacle we have faced. From the logistics of safely operating a business, to the numerous medicine shortages and increased patient demands, we have had to be open minded and fluid with our decision making to navigate this unprecedented time.

In a few lines, we have been affected in a similar way to nurses and doctors, however without similar support to protect us both financially and against the health risks of COVID-19. Today [in May 2020], along with many other pharmacists,

I am physically exhausted from the overtime we have worked over the last 2 months, which on average has equated to 60-70 hour weeks

and mentally drained from constantly appealing for help from our local MP that has unfortunately fallen on deaf ears.

I focus on the resilience of both my team and the pharmacy workforce throughout the country. As a business, we have had to respond in a timely manner to the needs of the community. As the safety of our staff and those we serve is paramount, we have personally sourced various PPE including face shields, hand sanitisers, masks and gloves. We have also modified various areas of the pharmacy to maintain

social distancing including erecting physical barriers composed of acrylic glass between staff and customers.

Regardless of the measures we have taken, in our pharmacy alone, we have come into close contact with two known patients who were later confirmed to have COVID-19. In addition, the demand for deliveries has soared as more people have self-isolated and we are now delivering at 150% of our normal capacity.



With many GP surgeries closing their doors and conducting all consultations over the phone but pharmacies maintaining their opening hours, we have also taken on a significant increase in minor ailments patients. I personally commend all key workers during this time; especially the doctors and frontline nurses however pharmacy heroes have also played their part, often without any 'capex'.

I know many pharmacies that have donated significant amounts of PPE, food and monetary funds towards the greater need of the country. My one fear is when we get through this, the many acts of kindness and sacrifices made by NHS personnel will be forgotten in the financial aftermath to follow.

I challenge everybody to prove me wrong!

Unsung Heroes: Overcoming Adversity During A Crisis

EDUCATIONAL WORKERS

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

TEACHING DURING LOCKDOWN

VIKESH VADUKAR

It's 7am in the morning and I'm lying in bed thinking what suffering this new working day will bring. By 8am I need to be logged onto my laptop to read numerous emails (mostly past midnight) from students anxious about their education. It usually is a problem logging into the numerous virtual learning platforms that they have been set work on, the minority usually are clueless about the work. I haven't even begun to think about how the special needs/looked after/disadvantaged/non- English speaking students are going to be completing their work (some with no access to IT or parental support).



By 8:15am I am usually completely awake (with a decaf coffee) and ready to tackle any issues that face me. Luckily for me my department is great and the school have a good system in place (even though it needed tweaking twice). I have to keep telling myself we are all learning and this

is a novel method of working for everyone. I now spend the next hour finding solutions to their problems. Most students who have limited access to IT are now able to collect paper based work from school, however, they cannot submit this work to mark, so lose out on necessary feedback. The remainder of the students with log in difficulties are an easy fix, a swift email with instructions for the third time this month and they are back on track. There are always students to be found not completing the work, just like the memes on social media, I tear out any last few strands of my hair that are left.

I now spend the remainder of the day ringing parents and trying to motivate pupils over the phone (who are probably engaged in Netflix or the Xbox) to complete any outstanding work for their own benefit.

I guess the message is that some work is better than no work.

It is always going to be difficult for the students to manage their day and complete work in the same quality and speed that they would at school.

Luckily we have the internet at our fingertips where hundreds of resources are available (sometimes too many) for the students to search for educational understanding. Most are lucky to have family/friends who can offer academic support in times of need and for which we are grateful.

The big question left now is 'what will happen next', how are we going to prepare for the educational establishments to open its doors to a new method of teaching?

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

SUPPORTING HOME EDUCATION FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

KAJAL MISTRY

I work at Treloar's School in Alton, Hampshire. Treloar's School educates physically disabled children and young people. The school campus is generally a hive of activity with education, therapy and professional care routines taking place on site for the majority of the students. It is a very unique education setting and there is a strong community feel within the school.

Following Government guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic, the school has had to make the difficult decision to close its doors to its students. Many of the students at Treloar's School are clinically vulnerable due to underlying health conditions. This has caused a huge amount of anxiety and pressure for the students and their families.

For many of the students that I teach, the school provides them security, a place to socialise with peers, in addition to an education that meets their complex learning needs. The non-verbal students in my class use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices, Makaton signing and communication books to aid their ability to talk.

Without the support of familiar people, the students can find it very difficult to communicate and so, can become isolated very quickly. Therefore, school

is one of the few places that they can confidently communicate and socialise with peers and adults. During the school closures, the students have become very isolated and lonely in their homes. As a school community, it was decided that it was vitally important for the students to have an opportunity for socialising with their peers. We have frequent Chat Time classes via Zoom with the main aim being for the students to see and talk to their peers. The students love sharing their jokes, news and pets often make an appearance too! Students with severe physical disabilities have a thoroughly differentiated curriculum to enable them to access their learning. In my class the students need their learning resources to be either enlarged, symbolised and/or tactile.

During the school closure it has been extremely difficult to provide learning that is suitable to meet the students' learning needs. I have had to post learning resources to families and send specialist equipment from school to individual students to support their learning from home. All the students require 1:1 support for 24 hours of the day and the school day would offer respite to the families. Some of my students also suffer from severe anxiety and emotional breakdowns.

All of this can be a lot of pressure for the families. Many of the parents that I have spoken to have mentioned the stress and worry that they are feeling during the lockdown. They are worried for their children's health, meeting all their physical needs and care routines and helping them learn. This is in addition to their other responsibilities such as, their work, other siblings in the family, etc.

I aim to provide learning tasks that will lessen the burden on the parents and provide them with some respite as well as engaging and progressing the students' learning.

It is a tall order to fill!

As teachers, we have felt a huge amount of pressure to try to meet the students' needs remotely. It is difficult and overwhelming. I desperately miss my classroom and all its teaching resources and equipment. At school there is a focus on providing a holistic education to meet the students' needs with a varied approach and this remains our primary motivation during the school closure. I have become acutely aware of things that we take for granted such as, a walk to the park or a shopping trip, being very difficult for the students and stressful for their families and carers.

During the school closure, I make regular phone calls to students' families to offer support and guidance. The parents will share their news and any concerns around the students' learning and mental wellbeing. In response to their concerns, we have been able to offer support in the form of counselling, music lessons and therapy sessions for the students' in my class.

Teaching and learning as we have known it to be has been turned upside down for the first time ever. It is an anxious time for all but for the students that I teach and their families, it is another pressure on an already complicated lifestyle. The students value the structure, security and familiarity of the school. They enjoy learning new things and benefit physically from the varied therapy programmes that they receive at school. They are vulnerable and remarkably special.

As a school community, we are trying our hardest to provide the students and their families with support through these challenging times.



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For any contributions, comments and correspondence please write to:
Sangh Sandesh, 46-48 Loughborough Road, Leicester, LE4 5LD, UK
publications@hssuk.org • www.hssuk.org • [f](https://www.facebook.com/hssuk) hssuk

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