

Statement from Dr Ben Allen, as told to Lancashire Life magazine (June 2020 issue)

THE DOCTOR

Ben Allen is a newly qualified first year doctor from Fulwood, Preston who is now working in a Covid hospital. This is his story from the frontline

I never envisaged my first year on the wards to be dominated by a pandemic. In order to acquire the breadth of experience and skills within the hospital, the usual routine would see us rotate through a range of different specialities, spending four months on each. But towards the end of our second rotation at the beginning of March, we were told we would not move on to our next post and would instead move to an emergency Covid-19 rota.

We all understood the decision to suspend our usual training had not been taken lightly, with this new rota being implemented to prepare for the anticipated surge in coronavirus patients entering the hospital. As the weeks progressed and the pandemic in our country worsened, we saw elective surgery lists postponed and the hospital enter a greater state of uncertainty. Would we be able to cope with the vast number of very ill patients predicted to flood through the doors? Would the workforce itself collapse through illness? I'm based on a ward where all patients are confirmed to have coronavirus, and I face the daily fear I may unknowingly bring the virus home and put my wife at risk. No matter how meticulously you wash your hands or attempt to wear the best available personal protective equipment, that fear never goes away.

But there have been positives. One of the most impressive things I've seen so far is how quickly we have mobilised and adapted our practices to help combat a disease we know so little about. It has been uplifting to see so many colleagues from allied professions answer the call and step into unfamiliar roles. From dentists to final year medical students, people have stepped out of their comfort zones and taken on new roles – some have even come back into the profession from retirement. But an avoidable tragedy brought about by this crisis is the worried mindset of people who are delaying seeking medical advice when they have a genuine need. We understand why people are cautious about coming into A&E, but we are still open as usual. Delaying going to hospital could have devastating consequences.

I remember the same question popping up at medical school interviews: Why do you want to be a doctor? Many of us replied with something along the lines of 'to save lives and help people'. Even without a pandemic, it's

important for any doctor to learn we cannot save everyone. But learning to deal with death on this scale is beyond what we could have imagined, and it sometimes makes us feel like we have failed in our job.

When we hear the people at 8pm every Thursday night, banging wooden spoons on metal pans and giving us a big cheer, it gives us a genuine boost. It's likely that during any one of those days, many of us will have seen people pass away or had difficult conversations with distressed family members, and the relentless encouragement and support from the public inspires us to keep fighting. But we must remember that it's not just doctors and nurses who are on the 'frontline'. Many of our colleagues in the wider NHS family have adjusted their usual working pattern, through picking up extra shifts or filling in for those who are ill themselves. From health care assistants to porters, clerks to pharmacists, every single member of the NHS is truly deserving of our support. And I'm very proud to be a part of it.