

Operating again – but for how long?

Six months from the peak of the pandemic, cameras return to the Royal Free Hospital – how is it coping?



IF 2020 is to be defined by a single word, that word must be Covid. In the UK, the virus's first wave loaded such unprecedented demand on the NHS that normal service was halted – appointments postponed, non-urgent operations delayed. As intensive-care beds rapidly filled up, others were just as quickly being emptied. Other words also came into play: crisis, cliff edge and collapse.

Nowhere was that more visible – at least to TV viewers – than at the Royal Free Hospital in north London when, in May, the two-part series *Hospital Special: Fighting Covid-19* brought us stories of heartbreak, of quiet courage and of physical exhaustion from the nursing front line.

This week, the cameras return as the hospital attempts to resume some sort of normality as its operating lists are reopened.

"Time will tell if the prioritisation of Covid patients over all others was right," says Daren Francis, consultant colorectal surgeon with the Royal Free. "I'm pleased I'm not in government making those decisions. My biggest fear from any second wave is not that non-urgent surgery will be postponed again. It's the loss of life and that ICUs will be overwhelmed."

When the virus struck, virtually all private hospital capacity across the UK was block-booked by the NHS until early September in order to ensure that



'I've never seen people dying on such a scale without family support'
DAREN FRANCIS

LIFE SAVER
Consultant colorectal surgeon Daren Francis

some existing urgent NHS treatment could continue. In the case of the Royal Free, that meant the hospital was running at half capacity during August and September, when filming on the new series of *Hospital* took place.

A British Medical Association survey has found that only 15 per cent of doctors have started catching up on their backlog, with more than five in six saying that they were worried about coping with demand from patients with non-Covid conditions.

Did Francis ever feel he was failing his patients? "No, I'd turn it round the other way,"

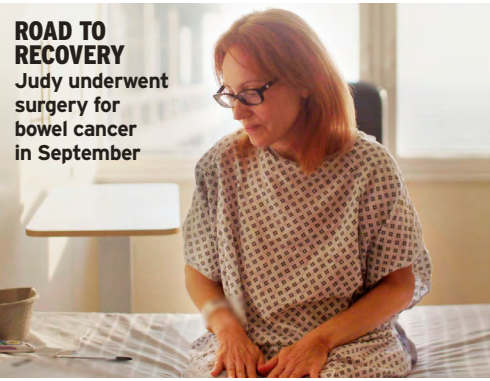
says the man who himself contracted what he calls a "medium" case of Covid just before lockdown. "We were doing the best we possibly could for patients. The prioritisation of Covid patients did have a significant impact and we tried to soften it. There was nothing we could do in terms of [patients'] mental anguish, but we were continuing to operate on those who were emergencies or high risk while minimising any delay in surgery. It's frustrating and difficult, but I'm proud of how we managed to do it."

The programme shows Covid's knock-on effect on 48-year-old Judy, a human resources

officer from Essex. After a local delay with her diagnosis of bowel and duodenum cancer, Judy's complex seven-hour surgery eventually took place on 14 September.

"Waiting was a killer," she recalls. "I had to self-isolate throughout, to be ready when the surgery became possible. It was so hard not to have face-to-face support from my friends."

Judy's surgery comprised a subtotal colectomy (the removal of most of the colon), which was carried out by Francis, and a Whipple procedure (the part-removal of the pancreas and small intestine, along with the gallbladder and bile



ROAD TO RECOVERY
Judy underwent surgery for bowel cancer in September

duct) conducted by another surgeon. The operation was Francis's first back at the Royal Free after the NHS deal with the private health sector ended. "It felt good to be back with familiar faces, and that sense of normality," he says.

In April, the Royal Free's usual ICU capacity was expanded from 38 beds to 69, with plans now in place to increase capacity again if Covid demands. No beds are ring-fenced for the sole use of those with the virus, and the hospital trust was unable to give current Covid patient numbers. Meanwhile, patients coming in for planned procedures must isolate for 14 days beforehand, with their entire households isolating for the final 72 hours. They must test negative on admission and be further tested throughout their stay.

At the time of writing, the Royal Free was conducting around 300 Covid tests a day, with results given in 36 hours, and approximately 23 rapid turnaround Covid tests a day, with results issued around two hours later. These latter tests are reserved for patients needing emergency surgery that same day.

BUT IT is still the case that only patients at the very end of life are allowed visitors, and then only when wearing full PPE. For Judy, who is now recovering at home, her 15-day stay was the longest she has ever been apart from her 14-year-old son Zach.

Even for seasoned professionals such as Francis, it was harrowing to see terminally ill patients denied visits from loved ones, including people he knew personally. "In my 15 years seeing cancer patients, I've never seen people potentially dying on such a scale without family support," he says. "I felt helpless so I did what I could, going to see the people I knew to give emotional support. But nothing substitutes having family by them. It's part of the process of dying, but patients were denied that by the virus until just before the very end."

Meanwhile, Judy is full of gratitude for the care she received at the Royal Free. She hopes her impending chemotherapy will be done by February "and I can be something other than a person with cancer again".

Francis, too, is looking to the future. "When the pandemic goes away, I don't think we'll go back to how we used to work. The pandemic has allowed us to develop for the right reasons, and what we have learnt may enable us to deliver healthcare even better. Life's a rich tapestry, isn't it? You become a different person by what you've gone through. I've never experienced anything like this, and I have faith in human nature again."

KATE BATTERSBY