

Medic goes from researching viruses to fighting them in the battle against COVID-19

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Liver specialist Ricky spent the last two years working in a university lab trying to find a cure for hepatitis B. But within three days of being told his lab was being closed due to coronavirus, he downed tools, put all his cell samples in the freezer and volunteered to work on the front line.

“I got a call from my NHS training lead asking if I would consider being redeployed at the hospital. I had worked in Addenbrooke’s since 2015, having completed most of my doctor’s training there so it just seemed the obvious thing to do.

“During my first shift in A&E I was asked if I wanted to work in COVID or non-COVID wards. Up until this point my knowledge of the disease was limited to a few webinar sessions the hospital had organised, reading academic papers coming out of China and Italy and of course what I had gleaned from watching the news. I ended up being one of the more experienced doctors during that shift, so I just put my hand up and volunteered to work with COVID patients.”

“I was worried I would be a bit rusty” he said. “But within hours of starting my shift I just got stuck in.... It felt good to be in a position to help people during this crisis .”

Ricky took on the task of making sure patients coming into the emergency department with COVID-19 receive the right treatment and the right amount of oxygen, working alongside a diverse cohort of newly recruited medical specialists ranging from plastic surgeons to ophthalmologists, all working outside their comfort zones but under the close supervision of

emergency and acute physicians who normally work in the Emergency Department.

‘I have been absolutely amazed by the camaraderie and good will of all the staff involved. All these people from a diverse range of medical backgrounds have just been coming together at very short notice to do the very best they can. Throughout this I have felt very well supported by my nursing and consultant colleagues.’

Ricky also worked alongside rapid response teams and intensive care units to make sure patients receive the best care - but it didn't take long for him to realise how devastating the disease could be.

“When I clocked off at 10pm on my first day I said good night to a 68-year-old patient with COVID who had no underlying medical conditions and did not look terribly unwell. The following day I found out that within five hours of me seeing him, he was on a ventilator in the intensive care unit.”

After his on-call shifts in A&E, Ricky was transferred to a ward which treats patients with COVID, many of whom are elderly and have dementia.

“It can be really daunting for them coming onto a ward. As well as being in an unfamiliar environment, the fact we have to cover up with PPE and wear masks, means that our patients cannot see our faces; this can be really disorientating for them.”

“This past week I have been speaking to the daughter of one elderly patient with COVID-19 who has been in hospital for three weeks after coming to us from a care home, and unfortunately he is not getting better. Because she is unable to visit him in hospital we are having to update her over the phone, something that comes with its own challenges . Normally we would have difficult conversations face to face, but it is even harder over the phone as you can't see the relatives' emotions or respond to facial expressions and body cues. However it is very rewarding when families thank us for all we do for their loved ones.

“We hope to be able to start doing video calls soon, so at least this will help a bit - but it is really hard for families.”

Ricky expects to be working in the hospital until June at the earliest.

“I am very much living life on a day by day basis at the moment. My fiancée and I had hoped to be getting married in September, but we have had to postpone that as she is also a doctor, working in a London hospital with COVID patients.

“These are strange times and I just really hope that we can find a vaccine soon – until then I will just try and provide help where it is needed the most. The resilience and selflessness of my colleagues motivates me to work hard every day and it is a privilege to serve at an institution such as the NHS ”