

# Lockdown in London

Our flat is part of a square building that consists of 2 sides flats and 2 sides offices, built around an underground car park with a garden of sorts in the middle (on top of the car park), with access only to the office people. Apart from the NHS IT floor, the offices are now empty. At night we can see a star for the first time, we aren't sure if this is due to reduced pollution or whether we are just spending longer looking out of the window now, actually it's probably a planet.

My 5 year old son tells it to hide from the coronavirus... they told him all about it before school ended a couple of weeks ago. He cried at night sometimes because 'everything is different', he had changed schools two weeks before the schools shut and was just settling in. He misses his friends from his old school. He sends some voice messages on Whatsapp to his friends, talking of love and praise for whatever picture they have sent to each other. Sometimes they facetime which usually ends up in ceiling to ceiling time as they forget to keep looking at the phone.

We sometimes go for a walk, us and a packet of antibacterial wipes, I snap at him not to touch anything, it's stressful, but we have found a few places to go that are not too busy. We can play for a bit between SOAS and Birkbeck University, where there is a ramp which is good for toy cars. I notice how a natural part of my social distancing is to avert my eyes at all costs, a reaction to the fear of inviting unwanted proximity.

I am a critical care nurse but my job is not directly on the unit anymore. Although this will of course change soon... the wave is taking a little longer to hit us since we don't have an Emergency Department and a lot of our admissions were actually people visiting/working in London. Finally (there was an uncomfortable pause), we have started to take patients from the other London hospitals who are really struggling like Barnet and the Whittington. My friend works at the Whittington ITU, she told me, from her 7 day isolation having had symptoms, that her colleagues are crying everyday at the overwhelming situation they are faced with.

Our staff are already starting to feel this. It's an entirely different way of working, communicating with each other through masks and visors. You have to walkie talkie out to the runner in the corridor to fetch you things or to be ready to help you out of your PPE if you manage to escape. The patients who we are receiving are not our usual group and the usual 1:1 ratio is replaced with 1:6 nurse to patient. Most of our nurses are specialised in Neuro critical care; proning\* is not something we usually do and rarely do we need to filter patients for renal failure, and only a couple of the patients in the unit would ever be this unwell, now they all are.

*\* 'proning' means placing patients in a prone position, on their front. It aids the ventilation to the lower lobes of the lung and helps to improve blood oxygen levels. For an ITU patient it takes a team of around 7 people. Patients requiring this are left in this position for up to 16 hours with just their heads turned and arm position changed every couple of hours. The prone position makes the patients look more vulnerable to me.*

I feel like, as a team, we are going through the stages of grief; denial, anger... we are only just moving out of that phase, which has been challenging. Flaws in how we work with each other and our relationships are magnified but we are getting there.

We are expanding our critical care, Great Ormond Street Hospital just gave us another 5 ventilators but now we are running low on other monitoring equipment. The drugs we are using are running out and we are having to find alternatives. The main site's ability to provide extra ventilated beds and non invasive CPAP beds has been limited by the infrastructure of the gas supply. The plans keep changing and its exhausting trying to keep up.

Meanwhile the nurses in non critical care roles are volunteering to help but that requires organisation and training. There is a lot of anxiety. Many nurses and doctors are far from their own families. Some staff have conditions themselves that make them vulnerable or they live with those that do, no testing means no guarantee they aren't taking the infection back to their loved ones.

We do have PPE. The nurses and doctors wearing it have deeply furrowed faces from the masks digging into their skin. Donning and doffing are the new buzz words.

Several of my colleagues are off with symptoms. They have just introduced some testing as a trial but for now it is mostly unavailable. It still takes at least 24 hrs to get a test result on a patient which makes identifying and containing difficult.

There are no visitors now to the hospital. We have started to try and call all the relatives in the morning just to let them know the night was ok. When we could see and speak to the relatives they would often want an update first thing in the morning.

We have asked them to email pictures to us of their loved ones and the family so we can place it by the bedside. It's nice for us to see the people we are looking after. It is hard to relate sometimes to the bodies in the bed, depersonalised by all the equipment and monitoring. We can only imagine the anxiety the families are feeling.

Work is my second family, we try and look out for each other and buy things the others can't get. Joy comes in the form of finding tomato paste, or flour. We can't get an online shop so we are forced to upgrade to Waitrose! The hospital is sent lots of free food from local establishments; I believe a celebrity has paid Leon to give us food.

The streets are quite empty and our staff our easy targets. My friend has her mobile phone snatched outside the hospital trying to check on the cab she had called as she was late getting back to her son.

It is nice that the NHS staff are getting recognition. This includes the unseen roles such as IT, who are working hard making sure equipment is in place and working and getting iphones up and running for patients to contact their loved ones. We are grateful to the supermarkets and the free taxis uber are providing and the many other acts of kindness.

On my way to and from work the BT Tower is visible. It rotates a message in black font on a yellow background 'STAY AT HOME', 'PROTECT THE NHS'. I watch it as I walk to work, past the main hospital site which is bearing the brunt of the COVID 19 admissions. There is no sign from the outside of what is occurring within.

Gower Street is quiet. The initial reluctance to press the button on the crossing for fear of contamination is no longer an issue now there is no traffic. Gordon Square is locked now and it is full of bluebells and you catch the scent of honeysuckle as you pass; through the railings it now seems magical. Waterstones is closed, there is a copy of 'The Plague' by Albert Camus in the window.

I can hear the bells from St Pancras New Church from our flat. They seem to ring at odd times, sometimes quite late. I like hearing them though, it makes me feel like this city is a village and gives a sense of timelessness (ironic I suppose as they are being rung to mark a time, although I haven't worked out the significance of the seemingly random selection of times yet).

So for now we can see the tsunami hitting the shore but it is yet to fully reach us. Meanwhile I am trying to homeschool. My son's teacher calls me at 11 a.m. while I am at work and asks if I was asleep. I find it hard not to be offended. The constant state of high alert at work and failure at home is taking its toll.

Back at home we bought a miniature sunflower plant from Waitrose. The instructions say to remove all but the three strongest seedlings once they sprout...we can't bring ourselves to kill the weaker ones.

I hope after all this, I remember to be grateful for the insights this time has given me regarding what is important to me and where I want to be and the courage and determination to act on them. I have lovely messages of encouragement from Kathryn P and Andy H which I have been very thankful for as well as the Othona emails. We are looking forward to when we can visit again.

Cassius watched "Knowledge is Porridge" [a [really fun video](#) made by Othona children and young people in 2010] and found it very amusing. He saw Hendrick, who he hasn't met, and said he really wanted to meet him as he looked like a nice person... despite his sinister role in the film! For now Cassius takes a cold bath in his swimwear to pretend he is at the sea.

*The writer is a nurse specialising in neurological critical care and a long-time Othona regular*