

Reflections by a trainee Pathologist

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the world – on economies, health and social services and, most importantly, on countless individuals and their personal wellbeing.

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on me, both professionally and personally. I am an ST4 histopathology trainee married to a GP, the mother of two young children, and I was due to take my Part 2 examination in April. The pandemic has caused my examination to be delayed and has also brought significant difficulties in juggling revision, work, childcare and home schooling.

I first became really aware of Covid-19 when I was on a Part 2 revision course in February. Every morning, on the breakfast news, there were reports of the rising death toll in China and of the British citizens trapped on the Diamond Princess cruise ship off the coast of Japan. At first the virus seemed distant but, as the days and weeks passed, it rapidly became clear that the pandemic was going to have a greater effect than many of us could have ever imagined.

I found it increasingly hard to concentrate on revision, and I was constantly distracted by news updates and the latest global incidence rates of the disease. As countries around the world went into lockdown, there seemed to be a growing sense of panic and impending doom. It was then, on 13th March, 2020, that the announcement came that the Part 2 examination was going to be postponed. My daughters' school was closed a few days later.

The pandemic has completely changed my working patterns – all of the registrars are on a new rota to minimise footfall in the department. We are either scheduled to cover surgical pathology or to work with the bereavement team to complete the mortality paperwork for the in-hospital deaths. The surgical workload has dramatically decreased as most elective surgery has been postponed, which means that education and learning opportunities are reduced during the working day.

As a female trainee and parent, I feel that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a greater adverse impact on my training than on those who are not parents. Statistics show that females are more likely to work less than full time (LTFT) than males, and this is usually due to childcare responsibilities. During lockdown, my children go to the local Hub when my husband and I are at work. The Hub is a facility for the children of key workers and children deemed to be at risk. At first my children didn't understand why they had to go to 'school' while their friends were at home with their parents and they seemed very unsettled that my husband and I still had to work because we are medics. Thankfully they've made good friends and now enjoy their time at the Hub. The facility is for childcare rather than education, so my children miss out on formal teaching/ home schooling when they're there but their happiness is the most important consideration. It is hard not to feel guilty, though, when their school WhatsApp groups are full of their classmates' home-based achievements including photos of artistic creations and details of newly learned skills such as piano playing.

When I am at the hospital, my training is suffering due to the reduced workload, and when I am at home I find it very difficult to revise as my children are with me. As any parent knows, that leads to constant interruptions. I work LTFT and normally revise on my days off while my children are at school and I go in to work one day at the weekend. This hasn't felt right in the current climate as my journey to and from the hospital could not be classified as 'essential travel'. My GP husband is working very long hours, which means that most of the mental load regarding childcare falls on me. I get all the messages from school about my children's homework, I receive all the Zoom invites for their extracurricular activities, and they use my phone for chatting to their friends, which resulted in my youngest sending £78 of text message emoticons as she didn't realise they weren't free!

During this difficult period, the internal 'pull' between my roles as a mother and a professional leads to me feeling at times that I'm not fulfilling either of these roles as well as I would like. When I'm at home and spending time with my family, neglected exam preparations are often at the back of my mind. When I'm working, I feel guilty I'm not spending time with my children.

I will sit the Part 2 exam in October, but I feel that the chance of me passing is significantly less than it would have been if I had taken it in April because of the considerable conflicting demands on my time and energy. I had spent months working hard preparing for the April date and now it seems like a lot of that time has been wasted. This is a source of sadness because that time could have been spent with my daughters. However, I hope that the extra preparatory time will help me to ultimately be a better consultant. There is additional stress as I don't know what will happen with the exam if there is a second peak of Covid-19 in Autumn – will it be postponed again or have alternative plans been made? Uncertainty is one of the hardest things to manage and there are many uncertainties that have come with the pandemic.

Although these are very hard times for so many people, I do believe that we must try to focus on the positive, to accept what we cannot change, to show kindness at every opportunity and to be grateful for what we have. As doctors we are fortunate that we have guaranteed employment and income, so we don't have the financial concerns that many others are facing. Yes, as pathologists, our training has been adversely affected. Yes, the probability of passing the exam at the next sitting is much reduced, but in our deanery at least, we haven't had to deal with the added stress of being deployed to a clinical role. If we and our loved ones can survive this pandemic safely, then that's all that matters.