

Cllr Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond, I'm your host Jim Millard and if this is Episode 9. In this week's podcast will be talking to Mark Sheen, consultant Nurse who works for an NHS trust. He contracted COVID-19 earlier this year and became critically ill. And we should say that whilst most people with COVID-19 experience moderate illness, according to World Health Organization statistics between 10 and 15% of cases progress to severe disease and 5% become critically ill. Mark, I'm sorry to say, very unfortunately you're still suffering from the effects of COVID-19. I'm very pleased that he's been able to join us here today to talk about his experience and of course to remind all our listeners just how important it is to continue to follow guidance to help stop the spread of coronavirus and keep people safe. So without further ado, hello, Mark, thank you very much. It would be great if we could kick things off with how old are you and how long have you been a nurse for?

Mark: OK, I'm 53 years young and I have been a nurse since 1986 where I initially did, minus training for people with learning disabilities and then subsequently undertook my general nurse training at Kingston Hospital and Epsom General Hospital. I've worked in the community as a Consultant Nurse for since 2007, and I've been working locally supporting people. I found myself in a very odd position of, well, I'm someone that doesn't get ill and I found myself starting to exhibit some of the symptoms of Covid, which was your classic sort of temperature new cough. Loss of sense of smell and taste in early April and I very, very rapidly started to deteriorate over a one-week period and for me it was a surprise how quickly I deteriorated as well. At the beginning of the week I self-isolated like we need to if we start to exhibit any symptoms but it soon became very very apparent that I was starting to get into respiratory distress or breathing difficulties which subsequently resulted in me being hospitalized.

Cllr Millard: Gosh. So that was just within a week, so at the beginning of the week when you were self-isolating, that was as a sort of precaution? rather than because you were debilitated?

Mark: yes, exactly, exactly and I was working from home, so I was still able to. I had my work laptop I was working from home, but progressively that became more difficult for me to actually undertake those sorts of functions.

Cllr Millard: and so and then on the Friday you were admitted to Kingston Hospital?

Mark: Yeah, I was admitted. The paramedics came out and literally took one look at me and took my oxygen level readings in my blood and they were down to 75% where normally should be round about 100. So that just sort of proved the difficulty that my body was experiencing and I was blue lighted to Kingston Hospital and taken to the A&E Department where I was clinically assessed by the team that were down there. Even in my sort of compromised health state, I felt good that I was in that environment. And I felt sort of safe in their hands as I could be, but I realized I was in trouble here but I was impressed by how quickly I was assessed and how quickly they pulled the relevant special speciality clinicians into the A&E Department to assess me as well. The staff Kingston were just fantastic. Absolutely fantastic, you know. So I knew I was sort of in safe hands even though I was absolutely scared witless.

Cllr Millard: So, what sort of care did you receive in there?

Mark: So I was immediately put onto what they call the CPAP Hood, which is a continuous positive airway pressure which is a large sort of oversized plastic hood with oxygen being high level oxygen being pumped into there. And the idea of that is to assist your lungs to breathe more easily because it was getting more and more difficult to breathe unaided and I was on that hood for just under 2 weeks wearing that. It's not a pleasant experience at all, but it became my new horrible best friend really. What I realized was that if I wasn't able to tolerate this, I would become even more unwell. I wore this for 22 and a half hours a day and it was only taken off for half hour intervals for three times during the day and that was for an opportunity for me to obviously well wash myself, but I was obviously being cared for by the nurses at this stage because I was so weak and also to have a bit of nutrition to eat something, drink fluids, that sort of thing.

I was spiking high temperatures as well, so if you can imagine wearing some sort of plastic hood on your head with really really high temperatures, it was like putting your head in an oven that's the only way I can sort of try to describe it, and it would immediately steam up and you would then start to sweat, but you're unable to rub your eyes or your face or anything like that because of the hood. And basically I had to sort of where that for an awful lot of the time.

I was also encouraged or placed into what they call the prone position, and that's where you're placed on your tummy and your front, and that allows, and that allows your lungs to expand more and hopefully get sort of more oxygen in them. That's the aim of the game on that one, and I was going prone for many, many hours during the day. Again, it's not a comfortable position to be in at

all, because, physically, you get very uncomfortable. And you get sort of, you know your tight hips. You get pains in your hips and your back in your neck, all that sort of thing, you know.

What was odd as well as being in that environment was that, which is very unusual for ADUS, high dependency units, or intensive care units, or ITUs as they're known, is that everyone in that area was experiencing exactly the same clinical condition. So, there were people there were men that are older than me and they were men younger than me as well. There were certainly some sort of late 20s early 30 year old gentleman physically very fit normally before they experience this Covid and I think for me that just proves how it can affect any part of the community. So regardless of your age, although we know older people generally experience this more and the effects can be particularly significant, younger people, don't, there's no get out of jail card on this one, I'm afraid. And in fact there was one particular chap that was in the worst state than I was, you know, and I could see that.

I think that unfortunately, throughout my experience there, I witnessed a number of people that died as well that were taken away and it's the sort of thing you can't unsee that and it sort of plays on your mind because you think to yourself well, am I going to be next, you know, and I had thought long and hard about that question and I had resigned myself that there was possibly a high probability that I might not get out of the hospital. Thankfully, I've proved myself wrong and but that certainly was something that I had strongly considered and that's a very sobering experience and you're all I can say is, I mean, my mind took me to some rather dark places as well. But thankfully, thankfully I did survive.

At the point of me being discharged out of the hospital, we reached that first dreadful milestone in the UK where we had 20,000 deaths, and it wasn't lost on me that although I was, you know, I was, you know, there was initial euphoria when I was discharged, but you know, but it wasn't lost on me the number of people that hadn't made it as well.

Cllr Millard: It is very sobering to hear you describe that and what you've been through. We're very fortunate to be able to talk to you because you're talking about it so clearly with your clinical knowledge and experience as well, which must have helped you and made it more difficult in some ways for you as well.

Mark: Exactly, exactly Jim, because I couldn't quite switch off the nurse in me, so I was reading other people's monitors and I'm reading my own monitors and things like that as well. And thinking oh crikey, I'm not doing too good today or that person or that person is doing better.

You know?

Cllr Millard: And friends and family, how did they react at the time?

Mark: They were horrified. I think if we if we just pause and consider the context of what was going on in the country at that stage, Covid was still very much unknown. A lot of the medics and health care professionals were finding their way with how to treat people more effectively. We had these dreadful, dreadful numbers of daily death toll that was being reported on the news. So I think there was a lot of clearly a national concern going on. And then when you bring that down to your own immediate friends and family, I think there was a number of them that said to me afterwards, you know, we thought this was it Mark, we didn't think we're going, you know, see you again and I have tried to concur with that.

Cllr Millard: Yeah, absolutely. As I mentioned in the introduction, you're not completely better, you're still suffering from the effects of it. Can you tell us more about what that is?

Mark: So, I'll just sort of divide this into sort of sort of two parts, really. My initial discharge from hospital, I was physically really quite frail, I had lost over two stone in weight. I was what I would call sort of furniture walking. I was walking in small steps at a time holding onto furniture to walk around because I couldn't walk unaided. I had a very reduced appetite. I had significant shortness of breath still and that's taken months to recover. And but I think the thing for me that the biggest thing was the level of fatigue. I cannot underestimate how awful it was. It felt like literally every day that you've been hit by a train and you had to physically stop what you are doing there and then and just rest because you just couldn't do anything. And there was a one point for a few weeks where I was sleeping up to 18 hours a day, which is just unbelievable. So now in the last few weeks I'm doing my walking, which is rich is really really good. I'm managing up to 10,000 steps a day. The shortness of breath episodes have reduced significantly, but I still get episodes of that. I can't put that down to any particular activity or lack of activity that I'm doing at the time, it's just sort of comes on and more recently that they found some sort of heart related Covid heart related issues that are still going to be a further chased up now really. So, I'm not out of the woods. But you know, I'm an awful

lot better. Well, you know, I'm an awful lot better than I was before couldn't be much worse really, to be honest, I was in a dreadful state.

Cllr Millard: In our last episode, we talked to Amira Girgis from Kingston Hospital, Acting Medical Director, about all the NHS workers and all they've been doing for us, and of course, you contracted this probably in the course of your work as a nurse, and thanks to all the nurses and doctors and everyone working in the NHS who are still continuing to put themselves out there. We've got to do everything we can to stop the spread, of Covid-19. And ultimately, stop ourselves and those we love getting sick with the virus in the way that you were. My last thing to ask really is do you have any advice that you want to share with listeners?

Mark: Yeah, I think there's a number of points. I know we can be sceptical about what advice has been given in the past and current advice and things like that. But I think a general good rule of thumb is, people do need to wear the mask. It's about I think there's a duty, a responsibility as a citizen, to protect each other here. So I think wearing a mask is protecting other people and by them wearing a mask, it's protecting you and I think if we just pause and think about the doctors and nurses, allied health care professionals, that have to wear these masks and gowns for 12 hours at a time, so I think when we're nipping to the shops to buy a loaf of bread or get our shopping to pop on a mask for an hour is not a massive ask really, so I would ask people just to sort of reflect on that. I think washing your hands regularly is an absolute must, that's been one of the biggest things that we know helps reduce the spread of this dreadful virus and also keeping your distance as well. Think ahead about the number of contacts. Do I need to go to the shops five times a week when I can go twice a week or once a week? Those are the sorts of things I think people need to just think about reducing their general level of contact that they have in different environments because we have to assume that the virus is everywhere at this stage.

Cllr Millard: It's been fantastic to talk to Mark and hear him talk so openly about his experience of COVID-19. As we know from listening to him, the pandemic and the ill continues to turn people's lives upside down. Let's follow Mark's advice. We've got to make sure that we stop the spread of the virus and we can do this. The death toll in the UK has now passed 60,000. We're living through a very, very challenging and difficult time, and we have to pull together as a community to look after each other. The important thing to remember is that Kingston Hospital provided fantastic here to Mark, but we don't want any of us to go through what Mark's gone through. Clearly, it's been extraordinarily difficult and unpleasant for him. I want to thank him again for his bravery and

honesty and going through all that, reliving it for us and describing it so eloquently. So let's all remember his advice. You know, let's wear mask, let's keep distance and let's remember to wash our hands. I know we can do this and we're going to do all we can to protect ourselves and those we love. Let's all stay safe.

For further information on the topics discussed in this episode, please see the show notes below. If you have any questions, please do feel free to email me on talk@richmond.gov.uk. If you're on one of those podcast services where you can like and subscribe, please do. If you can leave a review, that would be fantastic. Help us spread the word. It's been fantastic talking to Mark. Thank you for listening. I'm Jim Millard.