

Jat Harchowal transcript

JN: So, Jat nice to meet you. I wondered if you could start by introducing yourself?

JH: I'm chief pharmacist here at UCLH, at University College London Hospitals, and um I've been a chief pharmacist for many years –20 years now. I'm overall responsible for management of medicines in this hospital.

from March 2020 in fact we were heading we were heading towards a lockdown, the first lockdown in the country and that was that was interesting because we saw these increasing numbers of patients all needing intensive care treatments.

then suddenly we went into full lockdown at some point around about 20th March. And it was at that point I was working actually at the Royal Marsden Hospital and I got a from the regional Chief Pharmacist who said to me: we were seeing a lot of parts of the hospitals setting up all these temporary intensive care units and it was at that point the government got together with senior leads in the NHS and with the military and looked converting an existing facility into a large intensive care hospital.

They thought we could convert a conference centre in the east end of London and make that an intensive care hospital and on 22nd March they decided to call it the Nightingale Hospital in recognition of Florence Nightingale.

I was then asked to go over as director of pharmacy to help with the set up and running of the Nightingale Hospital.

The Excel Conference Centre, it was huge. I remember having pictures of these enormous halls and the plan every day was to get more and more beds ready in case we had to fill every one of those with intensive care patients.

At that point we had no idea what we were going to need but one side of the Excel Centre could hold 2000 and on the other side could hold another 2000. So at that point we were thinking 'oh my god' are we really going to have this full of patients and don't forget this was all happening at such a rapid pace that, you were having to suddenly

convert this conference centre into a functioning hospital with no previous infrastructure and within days you saw hundreds of staff coming in who'd never worked together before so we were pulling people out of hospitals, helpers, volunteers to come forward. The military to help us set up procurement supply chains, they were building a oxygen manifold outside, a VIE to help get liquid oxygen converted through pipes into this ITU that we were setting up. We were trying to convert another part of the Excel Centre into a pharmacy so that we could store drugs safely.

We probably had from start to finish maybe it was 10 days maybe two weeks max. to be open.

The one thing I would say I looked back on and the huge amount of pride how everybody came together, so the Regional Chief Pharmacist that made the call in those first 10 days was there with us every single day there were people from other hospitals coming in and helping us, Bart's hospital my fellow chief pharmacist there were helping me Raliat [Onatade]. You know, we had so many people dropping things and just supporting you, they wanted to make this work and they knew it was important, they wanted to feel that they could help. And the country was looking at the NHS at that time.

The other thing I realised quite quickly, I couldn't travel home and back there every day so I got to go maybe once a week but the days were long I'd usually be in at some point 7 in the morning and I wouldn't leave until maybe 9-10 back to the hotel room and you just constantly setting up new protocols and making sure your staff were OK.

I think it was it someone described as worst of times, it did feel like that at the time, the worst of times and the best of times. The best of times were that camaraderie the team approach, the goodwill that kept us going, the people who would send us meals because we weren't even thinking about those things...

And I caught Covid in my second week there I think. It wasn't routine to wear masks at that point. And I remember feeling really awful and I still took calls every day and then I remember on day 8 (that's 7 days going back in) I'd walk through one end of the Excel and the pharmacy was the

other end so it would be a kilometre's walk to get there and I couldn't believe how breathless I was for the whole of that time.

We ended up being the only site, the only Nightingale site that opened and had patients in those 6 weeks – yeah, there was there was a huge amount of interest focus maybe pressure as well, from around the country. We had visits from very senior people, from our prime ministers to I think the opening was done by now King Charles and actually that was that was signalling the importance of what we were trying to do.