

Stories from the Front Line

While the Coronavirus pandemic has presented numerous challenges to us all, it has also kindled extraordinary acts of kindness and courage. Tanglin Trust School is proud to count its own Alumni among those who have risen to the challenge of confronting Covid-19 head on in the UK – and we are delighted to share three of their stories here.

Kathleen Bowskill (2015)

Role: Student Nurse

Location: Lincoln County Hospital

“I’m a nursing student at the University of Lincoln and currently I’m also working twelve-and-a-half hour shifts on an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in the city. The days are long and busy – it certainly is ‘intensive’, as the name suggests.



The ICU itself is split into two sides: there’s the Covid-19 side, and the ‘clean’ or non-Covid-19 side. We have three half-hour breaks during each shift, although if we’re working on the Covid-19 side, we are given an extra 10 minutes on top of that to allow for removing our Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and putting it back on again.

It’s an unusual experience, working in PPE. We don’t wear our normal uniform underneath – we wear scrubs, and surgical clogs that are easy to clean. On top of that is a surgical gown; an FFP3, or respiratory face mask; goggles or a visor; some sort of head covering that protects the hair; always at least one pair of gloves. If we do any procedure that would usually require gloves, we simply put another pair on top. After around an hour or so into my shift, I do get used to wearing the PPE as I’m so busy doing my jobs. But, I have had some sores on my nose from the mask and it can feel like a furnace under there some days.

I started my nursing degree in 2017 and was originally due to graduate this September. However, due to the Covid-19 situation the NHS needs more staff on the front line, so all of us students were called in and asked whether we were willing to be deployed there. Of two options – working on the front line for three months in lieu of our usual three-month management placement, or working for six months, paid – I chose the latter. I was nervous about starting on an ICU. I still have a lot to learn, but the team is very supportive; there’s always someone available for help or advice.

Perhaps because of where Lincoln is geographically, it doesn’t seem as though we’ve been hit too hard by Covid-19. There was a surge in patients at one stage and now it appears to be petering off. However, there is a belief that once the UK begins to open

up again, Lincoln may be one of the harder hit places, simply because summer's approaching and we're very near the coast.

While I enjoy the work I do, my long-term goal is to join the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst to become an army officer. Meanwhile, my twin sister Rebecca, who lives with me, is currently training to be a teacher. Due to our family relocating, we left Tanglin shortly after taking our GCSEs and ever since we have pondered about her going back there as a teacher! We travelled around a lot as kids and attended so many different schools, but Tanglin is one of those places that sticks with a person. We had a brilliant time there."



Laurence Gardner (2013)

Role: Interim Foundation Doctor

Location: Homerton University Hospital, London

"I'm currently working on a respiratory ward where we care for patients who are recovering from Covid-19; I'm right in the 'hot zone', so to speak.

The ward has capacity for around 30 patients, but of course the numbers fluctuate somewhat. Recently, the entire ward was moved downstairs to make more beds available. Currently, there are several patients with us who have previously been on the acute wards; they have had the disease for quite a while and are gradually

getting better. Once a patient gets to the point where they no longer need to be in the ICU, they're 'stepped down' to our ward.

Because we're a respiratory ward, every bay is an 'Amber' bay – that means the patient is presumed to have Covid-19. So, whenever we speak to patients, we're fully masked up, and wear gloves and aprons. What's interesting is you don't always realise how much of your communication as a doctor is done with facial expressions; having part of your face covered can really change the dynamic. Obviously, it can be scary for the patients because they have four or five of us standing over them and they can only just about see our eyes over our masks. We do have to make that extra effort to chat to patients and put them at ease.

Before the crisis, I was in my sixth year studying Medicine at Barts, which is the medical arm of Queen Mary University of London. I had my final exams in March on the cusp of lockdown, and while I would have graduated this summer, usually students don't start work before August.

Currently, I work eight- or nine-hour days from Monday to Friday, and the hospital staff are very supportive of us all; they're aware this is very different to what we would normally be doing at this time. The first wave of Covid-19 in the UK is subsiding, so the hospital is fairly quiet and there's plenty of time for learning. It's actually been a really unique opportunity for me. Staff numbers have been increased as much as they can – in anticipation of either a second wave of the Coronavirus, or elective surgeries that were put on hold starting up again – and so in the meantime, the team

I work in are teaching me as much as possible; normally I'd only have a week to learn each specialty.

One aspect of my studies I have missed out on is going on an elective after my exams – I was due to study in Mexico for six weeks, before it was no longer possible to travel. My parents are still in Singapore and if they are still there in two years' time, I'd love to come through and see what it's like to work there. While at Tanglin, I did my first ever work experience at Changi General Hospital, so going back as a qualified doctor would be a great full-circle moment for me."

Varnika Kaushik (Head Girl 2013)

Role: NHS 111 Call Handler

Location: London

"I was in the fourth year of my medical degree at Barts when all clinical placements for students were ceased due to the UK-wide lockdown. After two weeks of being at home, I was ready to get out and help; it felt weird to be sitting around when there was so much that could be done.

NHS 111 is a free-to-call medical helpline for non-emergencies that's recently been recruiting medical students in London Central and West as call handlers. I work at a call centre between three and six days per week, depending on how busy the NHS algorithms predict the service will be. On an average day, there are around 30 members of staff there working in rolling shifts; between us we receive around 1600 calls every 24 hours.

The pandemic has affected every different facet of the population. Manning the phones has particularly helped me appreciate how every person along the chain of our healthcare system has being impacted in some way. I've spoken to all kinds of people, from members of the public who are worried about going to Accident and Emergency because they fear catching the virus; to care home staff who are concerned about a resident's breathlessness; to paramedics who are on the scene but can't enter because of social distancing measures. We have a huge amount of information and resources at our fingertips to help.

Care homes for the elderly are one of the UK's hotspots in the fight against the Covid-19 and we have recently experienced a huge increase in calls from those centres. Due to the pandemic, doctors can no longer go out to verify a death in person; instead, they must do this over the phone or via video link with the help of someone who's already present. As you might imagine, having to assist in that process can have a real impact on the deceased's loved one, or a carer who does not have any formal medical training. It's asking a huge amount of those people and I feel very passionately about supporting them.



Varnika wearing her "Thank You NHS" TShirt with pride. The rainbow has become a symbol of hope in the crisis.

Generally, the number of mental health-related calls has risen, including those in which the callers are experiencing suicidal thoughts. It can be hard to help a person when you're not face to face, so you have to work even harder to ensure your tone is soothing and calming. I find I have a voice I can automatically 'switch on' now, although some calls can still be difficult to handle. Thankfully, the management team is lovely and can help me to debrief afterwards.

My plan is still to return to Barts in September, however I'm concerned my degree might look quite different from now on, should wards need to reduce the numbers of people coming in and out. We will just have to work with what we've got! Hopefully, it won't be long before I can come back to visit Singapore, where my parents live. My sister is currently in Year 8 at Tanglin and whenever I am there, I like to go and pick her up at the end of the school day; it's a good excuse for popping in to see my former teachers!"

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and interviewee, and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Tanglin Trust School.

