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Insight Series

*Reflections on the NHS and Charity in
the Time of Covid-19*

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**This paper was written in December 2020 as a reflection on the changing perception among the general UK population on the NHS and charitable giving in light of CoVid 19 in the year hence.*

As I finish a virtual call between my Trustees and an internationally renowned kidney transplant consultant who has been updating us on how he is continuing his hospital charity funded research project from his home office, I am yet again forced to reflect just how much events in 2020 have changed things as we know them for so many. Though, I am also reminded of how much the people I work with are trying to ensure that we still deliver our mission of care to patients and their families.

I have the privilege of working at one of the largest NHS Trusts in the country – University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, which runs four hospitals in the Midlands. Probably best known of those is the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham which runs Europe’s largest organ transplant programme, has a global reputation for major trauma (Malala Yousafzai was treated there and had significant reconstructive surgery after she was shot by a Taliban gunman in 2012 and the hospital hosts the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine, treating the UK’s Armed Forces) and the world’s largest single floor critical care unit.

And the Trust has needed those critical care beds more than ever this year. University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust has been the worst affected NHS Trust in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 1,350 deaths up to the end of November 2020. Only two more of the over 200 NHS Trusts in the country have seen more than 800 deaths. I am not a doctor. I am not a nurse. But I have seen first-hand the impact on staff and patients of COVID-19, lockdown and the challenges faced at our hospitals. I run University Hospitals Birmingham Charity (UHB Charity), the hospital charity for University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust. It is a charity independent of the NHS, but set up exclusively to support patients of the NHS. Thanks to our generous donors and supporters, we are able to provide over £5 million each year to fund things that are over and above what the NHS can supply – from cutting edge medical equipment, to facilities not normally seen in NHS hospitals, to the research projects like I was discussing with our renal consultant.

I have worked in Birmingham for the past decade, and during that time have overseen some amazing projects – Fisher House, our home away from home for military patients, and CyberKnife, an amazingly precise form of radiotherapy that has offered hope to many patients who had no other treatments possible for their cancers – but the hospital charity was probably still not greatly known outside of the hospital walls. COVID-19 changed that.

UHB Charity is one of 241 “NHS charities” across the country, that have suddenly found themselves thrust to the forefront of the population’s attention through Clap for Carers, Captain Tom Moore’s walking for the NHS, and so many other amazing fundraising stories and generous donations and support. We are members of NHS Charities Together, the umbrella membership organisation for NHS Charities, which last year mainly provided training and information to hospital charities, launched a national “have a cup of tea for the NHS” event and had an income of £388,000. At the end of November 2020, an amazing £140 million had been donated to NHS Charities Together, on top of the donations and fundraising that took place at a local hospital level.

Companies and individuals that had never engaged with hospital charities before were making a huge difference to patients, families and staff across the country through their support, and hospital charities were coordinating the donations not just of money, but of food, drink, toiletries, clothing and even toilet paper (!) as people showed their support for NHS frontline staff. Restaurants were delivering hot meals for intensive care staff, airlines were donating the washbags from their grounded business class cabins as comfort packs to staff who were working 12-14 hour shifts and of course the nation was on its doorstep on Thursday evenings clapping for our carers.

I have seen the faces of hardworking and pressurised nurses light up when we've taken them Easter eggs to the ward, and I have been there as a shoulder to cry on when they visit the "wobble rooms" that we set up for staff to get away from the wards for a cup of tea and a biscuit but also importantly to be there to give staff some psychological and emotional support. And this is what has been so different this year. Every year, patients come to our hospitals for a vast range of treatments for every possible ailment under the sun. Lots of them get better, some of them continue their treatment, and a thankfully small number pass away. But there is no all-encompassing disease that affects everyone, and there are always success stories to be shared amongst different teams.

COVID-19, especially in the first lockdown, changed all that. Suddenly the only patients we were seeing were those with COVID-19 whilst we tried to protect those patients with other illnesses and conditions. It was a new virus to us, and one that staff were having to learn how to treat on a daily basis. Nursing staff who would expect to see most of their patients walk out of the hospital after treatment were seeing much higher mortality rates than they were used to. Visiting was banned, and nursing staff had to provide much of the emotional support to patients that would normally be provided by loved ones at the bedside. The hospital charity tried to help by introducing virtual visits using mobile devices and tablets but it is not the same as having someone hold your hand.

We know that it has been of great comfort to families to be told that a nurse was by their loved one's bedside when they passed away, but that is also a great emotional strain on nursing staff. The need for emotional support for our clinical staff, I think was, for the first time, really visible to the wider population and this is what swelled the levels of support to the NHS. Social media helped, with videos from frontline staff getting out to much wider audiences than would have been possible in the past. The very fact that the nation was in lockdown and was spending more time meeting virtually meant that more people could take part in things such as PE with Joe, and use neighbourhood WhatsApp groups to coordinate Clap for Carers evenings, and all of these put the message that the NHS needed help and support to the forefront. And it was the fact that it was all for a single cause that made it easy for people to focus on a campaign of help.

As a fundraising hospital charity, we often say that one of the strengths of our hospitals – the huge range of illnesses, diseases and conditions we treat – is also one of our weaknesses when trying to attract donations. We know that people like to donate to something specific, and when trying to say why a general hospital should receive donations instead of, for example, a specialist children's hospital or cancer hospital it can be hard for a donor to comprehend the sheer breadth of the NHS. COVID-19 was presented as the clear "enemy" this time, and NHS staff those

“battling” on the frontline. People were clear they wanted to help the NHS, and hospitals in the main became the focus for that help.

Normally, hospital charities such as UHB Charity will identify an issue they want to address, seek the views of clinicians of how best that can be addressed, and then launch a fundraising campaign to seek the funds. This time, the UK population was already responding and donating money and goods before a fundraising campaign was even launched. It meant that the hospital charity could identify how best to support patients and staff and immediately fund those projects, which was important in those early days of lockdown when it seemed the NHS was at risk of being overwhelmed.

One of the interesting aspects of working in the middle of the pandemic was the perceived needs against actual needs. Whilst there was plenty of media discussion about the availability (or lack of) of PPE available to the NHS, University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust for certain, never experienced the need to use charitable donations to fund PPE, and yet plenty of our donors wanted to give funds for the perceived need for PPE. Meeting donors’ needs and expectations is important, so by focusing on the emotional and mental needs of clinical staff helped us to show why we were providing direct support to staff through wobble rooms, counselling and enhanced rest facilities including outside space instead of purchasing PPE. Being able to share videos of staff receiving support funded by donations also made a great difference, not just to thanking our donors but encouraging new fundraisers and supporters to do something to help our staff.

NHS Charities Together as a national brand helped to coordinate the nation’s wish to support the NHS as well, as best evidenced by the amazing £39 million (including Gift Aid) that was raised on Captain Tom Moore’s JustGiving page by the time of his one hundredth birthday. An incredibly inspiring story, it tapped into the zeitgeist of the time, giving people an outlet to fulfil their desire to support the NHS, before NHS Charities Together had even been able to launch its own appeal. NHS Charities Together has also been keen to ensure that donations have been spent as soon as possible with as much impact as possible, and over £110 million has been made available to its member charities, providing much needed support to patients, families and staff.

Many people have suggested that COVID-19 will have provided a shift in charitable giving and gratitude to the NHS, and certainly hospital charities have become much more high profile in their towns and cities across the country, but I am conscious that UHB Charity cannot rest on its laurels and just assume this level of support will continue. Economically, the whole country is facing challenges. Whilst NHS charities may certainly not have been as affected as some other areas of the charitable sector, I would expect over 90% of NHS charities will have a lower level of income this year than last. Being an organisation located in Tier 3 for sustained periods, lots of our traditional avenues of fundraising through mass participation and community events have been lost this year, and I expect to see a reduction in income of around £2 million in 2020.

New donors and supporters have given to us this year, and others have decided to move on to other causes – this happens every year, but what we have seen this year is more people having to stop giving because their circumstances are forcing them to, rather than because they have decided to do so. But I am still positive for the future. UHB Charity will, like any successful business, be able to thrive by

understanding what our customers want and then supplying it to them with great customer service. It can be that simple.

Will COVID-19 change people's approach to charitable giving? Will it change donor's expectations and motivations for giving? Probably yes to both questions, but the fundamental need to understand and meet our customers' needs and desires remains, as always, relevant. In the nearly three decades of work since I graduated from University of Birmingham, I don't think there has been a single year that I haven't had to adapt to change, but putting the customer first has always led to success.

And I make no apology for using the word customer. Charities should recognise that donors and fundraisers have a choice of who they want to support. Taking our donors for granted will lead our organisations down the same route that Debenhams and Arcadia have found themselves when they no longer met their customers' wants and failed to provide great customer service. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed much within the country, and indeed the world, and not everything has changed for the worse. NHS Charities have a duty to their patients, their families, and their hospital staff, to ensure that the raised profile is not lost, and we demonstrate how we can make a lasting difference to the health of our nation.

I feel fortunate to be at the forefront of that raised profile, and I have a story to tell of how University Hospitals Birmingham Charity will continue to drive excellence in healthcare across the Midlands and how we can demonstrate the difference our donors and fundraisers make at an individual level as well as collectively. The pandemic has shone a light onto our NHS workers like never before. Here at UHB I was privileged to speak to hundreds of frontline workers and I was struck by their collective attitude to their roles. At a time of great worry for the nation our staff members showed exceptional strength of character to continue their jobs in the face of the pandemic. Although scared for the health of their patients, colleagues, families and themselves, they showed remarkable resilience during long shifts on COVID wards, whilst wearing uncomfortable PPE. A strong sense of duty and responsibility runs deep within the NHS, and I believe that it was this moral character that the public sought to reward through their donations.

During the first national lockdown, as people's lives changed dramatically overnight, there was a sudden need for the British public to find a sense of purpose, and to feel that they were making their contribution to the collective national effort. The NHS, which since its inception has increasingly formed part of our sense of national character, became the rallying point for the public. For the public, the NHS is not a sprawling bureaucracy. Rather, it is symbolic to many people of a moral collective spirit, embodied by those that work for it, that became the centre of our national consciousness during the early months of the pandemic. The NHS became the rainbow of hope for our country in a troubled time.

As I write, I can see out of my window the COVID-19 Vaccination Hub for the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham. As the vaccine rollout accelerates, the NHS is once again a beacon of hope, with the vaccine providing hope of a return to normality that the nation craves. The socially-distanced queue of people waiting outside the Hub to receive their vaccination is a visible sign of hope for the future. They are only there thanks to the incredible efforts of thousands of scientists who will become the unlikely heroes of the coming months.

Despite the vaccine, COVID-19 is likely to be with us for a long time, but so will cancer, so will heart disease, so will diabetes. And University Hospitals Birmingham Charity will be there accelerating the pace of research, building new facilities and looking after the welfare of our patients and staff. 2021 will be an exciting year. We launch our plans for the Birmingham Transplant Centre, a national centre of excellence for organ transplantation. There are only two hospitals in the UK that carry out heart, lung, liver and kidney transplants – Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham and Freeman Hospital Newcastle, with the organ transplant programme in Birmingham nearly twice as large as that of Newcastle's.

This makes Birmingham the best place to create a national centre of excellence that will create a "one stop shop" for patients undergoing organ transplantation – a purpose-built facility for pre-transplant consultations, additional fitness classes before surgery, patient support groups, and rehabilitation classes after surgery. It will also be home to world leading surgeons and researchers who are at the forefront of research and technology extending the success of transplantation. We are addressing health inequalities with our support of the new Ambulatory Care & Diagnostic Centre at Heartlands Hospital in Bordesley Green, in the highest 10% of the most economically deprived wards in England, with only 54.5% of the population economically active compared to 77% across the country as a whole, and 20.1% of the population with long term health problems or disabilities compared to 12.7% across England.



And yet everything we do needs to be focused on our goal of providing the very best service to our donors and fundraisers, for without them, none of our projects would be possible. This is why I want to finish this piece by thanking two wonderful people I met during the first lockdown again. George (7) and Florence (5) set up a stall outside their home to raise funds to support the NHS during the first lockdown, and set about selling unwanted toys and other items to their neighbours. Showing wonderful entrepreneurship for someone so young, George set up his shop by 7am each day so that he could reach his target audience – dog walkers! George and Florence's kind-hearted neighbours began to donate

items for them to sell, and at one stage they were even selling strawberry plants.

I was delighted to be invited to collect their fundraising in person, and the smile on George's face (who wants to be a doctor when he grows up) was reward enough, but that little bit of extra customer service led to coverage in the local newspaper, the

school getting involved in fundraising, and parents who will tell others about the customer service the hospital charity provided.

COVID-19 no doubt will have long lasting effects on the economic health of the country as well as the physical health, but if charities can focus on ensuring that each donor and fundraiser has such a positive experience of supporting their charity that they tell one other person how they made a difference, the future will be rosy for us all.



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