

“What stays with me is the feeling of helplessness” – on International Nurses Day, a young nurse recalls her time on a COVID-19 ward at the beginning of the pandemic



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In March 2020, Miranda Edge, aged 24, had only been qualified as a staff nurse for 6 months when she learned that the post-surgical ward she worked on in the West Midlands, United Kingdom, was to become a COVID-19 ward.

While the world slowly took stock of the spread and severity of COVID-19, Miranda was confronted with the harsh reality of the emergency as her ward was adapted to deal with the fallout from this new disease.

“Full masks, visors, gowns, gloves. It was very, very stringent,” remembers Miranda. “If I forgot something outside the ward, I just had to do without it, because once I was in personal protective equipment, there was no popping out to get it. I was sweating from everywhere and felt very claustrophobic. I also felt that I wasn’t an actual human anymore. I’d be coming to patients almost like an alien. There was no personality behind it.”

Her ward took in extremely sick older patients, many of whom were unwell before catching COVID-19. Due to their fragility, they could not be helped by intensive care. In the absence of any known treatment at the time, all the nurses could offer them was oxygen.

“A lot of them really were scared. And obviously, we couldn’t let in any visitors. If people were really unwell, we could let one family member come in. It’s a horrible thing to say, ‘You can’t come in to see your

dying relative'."

Miranda still struggles with memories of the 10 consecutive weeks that she worked on the COVID-19 ward, when it became "normal" for several patients to die every day, while many more sick people kept arriving.

"The hardest thing about working with patients who were really sick with COVID-19 was the fact that they didn't know what was happening to them. I had patients say to me, 'Don't let me die. I'm scared.' That kind of thing stays with you. At the time, I told myself, 'Just get through this.' But there are many occasions when I think, did I do the right thing?"

It was only later, after the ward reverted to its normal function, that Miranda's team was able to begin to come to terms with the magnitude of their experiences. Her team took part in therapy sessions, during which they were able to cry and share some of the emotions they had been suppressing throughout the crisis.

"What stays with me is the feeling of helplessness. My job as a nurse is to help people and that's all I've ever been trained to do. The best we could do for our patients back then was to give them fluids. So many died."

Given the enormity of what she has seen, Miranda urges everyone to get vaccinated without delay.

"No one's invincible. I struggle to convey the severity of what we saw. It wasn't just a normal illness. We didn't know what it was going to do next. Even now, there are people still living with the life-changing effects of COVID-19. It's certainly not a mild disease."

Miranda now works on a busy medical ward. Looking back, the one positive she takes from her incredibly difficult experiences on the COVID-19 ward is the importance of team work.

"We couldn't have got through it without each other. We were the support system for each other and now we have a very close bond from our shared experience. What I saw was life-changing, and though it's not what I would have chosen, it has given me such pride in our profession."

This International Nurses Day, WHO recognizes the dedication and professionalism of nurses everywhere, which during the pandemic have been tested as never before.

Nurses and midwives comprise half of the professional health workforce globally, interact with people from birth to death across all types of settings, and account for about 90% of contacts between patients and health professionals.

Enabling and supporting nurses and midwives to work to their full potential is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and supporting universal health coverage, and to meeting current and future population health needs. This was the focus of last year's World Health Assembly, which endorsed the WHO Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021–2025 with resolution WHA74.15.

Activities for its implementation in the WHO European Region are outlined in “Building better together: Roadmap to guide implementation of the Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery in the WHO European Region”, also referred to as WHO/Europe's Nursing and Midwifery Roadmap.

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