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2020: A Reflection

"Hard times don't create heroes. It is during the hard times when the 'hero' within us is revealed."
(Bob Reilly)

2020 has truly been a time when the hero within each of my colleagues has been revealed. Early in 2020, with the emergence of a new SARS variant called COVID-19, and disaster stories from Europe, the threat of a pandemic in Ireland was looming. Leaders from ICU including the ICU Director, in liaison with Clinical Nurse Managers from ICU, theatre and PACU united to implement a pandemic plan. The pandemic plan, which was created with foresight, had evolved through various iterations as the potential pandemics of the 1997 bird flu, 2003 swine flu, 2009 H1N and 2014 Ebola scare, threatened but never materialised. 2020 was the first time the pandemic plan was required to be implemented. The foreplanning was vital in the successful establishment of a critical care service expansion which was required to meet the need of a surge in patient capacity.

The McCollum Room, or Control, as it came to be called, was the hub for the hive of activity which ensued. Control, manned with unrelenting virtuosity by senior Anaesthesiologists/Intensivists, formed the 'focus' of strategy planning, the meeting point for referrals for consultant colleagues from differing specialities and the centre for planning for the critical care spill over, which encompassed the entire theatre complex.

The admirable work of the multidisciplinary members in driving forward with the pandemic plan was remarkable. Theatre recovery was transformed into an intensive care unit, and theatre rooms themselves became mini stand-alone critical care pods. The expertise of the clinical engineers eased this transition. However, the equipment is nothing without people power. 2020 was a time for leaving comfort zones behind. So many people within the theatre and critical care complex stepped up to meet the need to provide support for the expansion of the critical care services. Health Care Assistants increased their step count tenfold, maintaining essential supplies in all areas; theatre-, anaesthetic- and recovery nurses looked after critical care patients, and learnt new skills with ventilation and infusions. Critical care nurses supervised and trained anyone willing to learn, and stretched themselves to cover an almost impossible service need.

Anaesthesiologist and Intensivists changed work patterns to be available in-house 24/7 for the duration of the first wave. Theatre activity reduced and all Anaesthesiologists, consultants and trainees alike, shifted into high gear to care for the surge of critically ill patients. Anaesthesiology trainees stepped up to the challenge, embracing the steep learning curve; engaging in education on online webinars from countries deeper into the pandemic; perfecting practical techniques of donning and doffing and performing complex procedures fully gowned up. Interdisciplinary training increased with any trainees attending

and supervising MDT simulations to prepare for the unexpected emergencies, and creating care plans and pathways to improve personal safety and patient outcomes. Colleagues from all disciplines attended to assist with patient care. A multidisciplinary proning team was formed, proning and unproning critically unwell patients throughout the pandemic surges. The huge team effort by everyone resulted in the deserved award of 'Hospital Team of the Year'.

Patients had surreal experiences of interacting with staff through layers of PPE. Everyone interacting with patients increased their compassion and calming conversations exponentially to counterbalance these frightening circumstances. Limited family visits meant distressing and emotive family conversations had to be managed telephonically and electronically. Caring and compassionate staff stepped in to witness and comfort dying patients, and comfort grieving families. Moments to reflect, however, were limited as staff resilience was stressed, and the need to move on and care for new incoming patient was ever-present.

Community support was overwhelming, and professional resilience and well-being support became an increasing focus to sustain ongoing patient care. Throughout the pandemic the reliance on colleagues as friends and councillors has become the reality. Within the teams breaktimes and handovers became opportunities to express emotion, share fears and fatigue, and be a sounding board to relieve the stressors of the working day. Support for each other, allowing moments of human vulnerability, strengthened the bond between team members. Daily interactions created a foundation of support which allowed each person to battle on.

Throughout the first wave, the relaxation of lockdowns and the second wave, the consistent and outstanding care provided by all members of the Critical Care and Anaesthesiology departments never wavered. Practices were adapted and theatre activities continued. With less theatre activity going on in the main complex, the opening of the a stand-alone Ambulatory Surgical Centre provided a much-needed and well-utilised route for urgent day-case surgery to continue. Anaesthesiologists keen to return to theatre embraced the opportunity – and junior trainees who required a return to the basics were prioritised to continue practical education in the ambulatory surgical centre.

Although 2020 provided unique trials and hardships, the gains achieved are immeasurable. The hero within each member of the team was revealed, and numerous patients' lives were saved. Working relations between teams have strengthened. New collaborations between laboratory, respiratory medicine and psychology have been forged to encourage research and management strategies in the face of a new disease. Many trainees had the opportunity to participate, and present research findings.

Continuing to build and strengthen interdisciplinary relations has been one of the positive outcomes from this pandemic. Winning the prize will contribute to the purchase of an advanced airway manikin to facilitate multidisciplinary training. This will provide ongoing opportunities for all team members to educate and train together.

I will end with a huge thank you for the outstanding professional and personal care which each member of the Anaesthesiology and Critical Care department has demonstrated throughout 2020.

'What matters is the countless small deeds of unknown people who lay the basis for the significant events that enter history. They are the ones who have done things in the past and they are the ones who will have to do it again in the future.' (Howard Zinn)