

COVID-19 vaccinations

The vaccination programme commenced at the end of last year and we now have three vaccines available to undertake the enormous task of vaccinating the population of each of our countries, offering hope as a potential way out of the COVID-19 pandemic

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The daily news is overwhelmingly distressing right now with the knowledge that although the infection rate is starting to decrease, the deaths sadly continue. I wrote this in January, the day after the highest number of deaths to date were recorded at 1610. The total number of recorded deaths in the UK now stands at more than 118,000.

However, the total number of vaccines given is now announced daily and as *Practice Nurse* went to press, had reached over 15 million. One Saturday in January, the Louisa

Jordan (LJ) Hospital, at the Scottish Events Campus, Glasgow, undertook a pilot to vaccinate 5,000 people in one session – it was called ‘Super Saturday’ and the goals were achieved.

Many travel medicine practitioners in the Faculty of Travel Medicine (FTM) have lost much of their work for understandable reasons, as the travel industry has been decimated by the ongoing pandemic, but some are managing to put their core immunisation skills to use by helping in the vaccination programme. One such member is Clare Henderson, MFTM who usually runs her

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and the Louisa Jordan pilot

private travel clinic in Glasgow and her training business (TREC) in Scotland. Last April, mindful of the impact COVID-19 was having on her work, Clare wisely joined the bank for the Greater Glasgow and Clyde Health Board and started working as a bank nurse in the COVID A&E, and then later last year on the flu programme.

As a result, when it came to the COVID-19 vaccination programme, Clare had already undertaken much of the mandatory training required, but needed to study the e-learning modules for COVID, the vaccines, the documentation on the prescribing and administration methods and become generally competent to undertake this new role. Clare was one of the 65 immunisers at the LJ that weekend and I spoke to her about the experience.

The shift was 12 hours, with two 15 and one 30-minute break in the day. As an extremely experienced immuniser and a consummate professional who has all the skills to assess, counsel and advise on immunisation, Clare described the opportunity to help as an honour and privilege. She explained it was not too physically exhausting as she was positioned at one station and was seated for most of the time, but the amount of talking the process required with each individual recipient was tiring, and of course the need to be mentally astute throughout was essential.

Her second patient of the day had a complex medical history that required in depth knowledge to action appropriate care and she felt grateful she was knowledgeable and sufficiently confident to deal with the situation without any problems, and also had the skills to advise competently and reassure the patient in question.

Clare was highly praising of the operational process in place at the LJ. She described the enormity of the operation as like none she had ever experienced in her career of 30 years working in the health sector, and said she felt it demonstrated the work of the NHS at its very best. I asked what would be her most important lasting memory in time to come and she said very definitely the impact of seeing the layout of the LJ Hospital for the first time, the four rows



Travel health specialist nurse Clare Henderson 'just wanted to help'

of bay after bay where they now vaccinate, that stretched for significant distances and the potential image of how it may have been filled with COVID patients. She described it as 'so emotional and humbling' as was the close of Saturday for her as well, as the shift ended and the task had been achieved.

I've known Clare for over 20 years now, a very experienced and modest travel specialist nurse, she expressed discomfort at undertaking this role and being called a 'hero'. I know the band 5 she was on to be well below her pay grade, but she just wanted to help, to help to get us out of the situation and get vaccines into people, to stop suffering from the disease and reduce the enormous impact the care of patients was having on staff in the intensive care units and COVID wards. I wholeheartedly concur with these feelings, the current news reports of staff truly at the frontline is heart-wrenching – I find myself in tears at the sight of not only the patients suffering, but also of the physical and mental wellbeing of the staff as well – it's hard to imagine just how difficult it must be for them.

Throughout the pandemic I've struggled with a desire to help, but lacking in the modern day nursing skills to be near the frontline. However, the vaccination programme offered hope, as with 30 years' experience of immunising as my core

practical skill, I knew this was something I could do and for all the reasons Clare described. Having applied and made enquiries to become a vaccinator through five different avenues, (four of which were on a volunteer basis) with no success to date is frustrating, but I'm sure the logistical process to respond to so many requests must be challenging in itself. I know of many colleagues who have the skill and time to help experiencing similar problems with the recruitment process.

There is much in the press and on social media about the lengthy and unnecessary training. That has now been more focussed to the task in hand, and I find it of less personal concern if it achieves high standards and ensures safe care delivered by all those applying to become vaccinators. I'm sure in the end my attempts to help will prove successful, the vaccine programme will be ongoing for many months to come and perhaps if so, I'll write again! But in the meantime, we are preparing a fuller article for 'Emporiatics' to describe some of the work that Faculty of Travel Medicine practitioners are doing in the whole vaccination programme, from being part of the vaccine research trials, to managing logistic programmes with the military, to the experiences of those who are vaccinating.

But to all of you reading this who are either working on the frontline, or helping in some other way directly on COVID, including as a vaccinator, my thanks go out to you for your dedication, strength and stoicism in all that you're doing.

■ **Postscript:** An update as we go to press, I'm still pursuing avenues to vaccinate but it's frustrating and perhaps irrationally upsetting, but ongoing for 3 months now and I am nowhere nearer to helping! In the meantime, I'm working on the latest issue of Emporiatics. Previous issues are at <https://rcpsg.ac.uk/college/this-is-what-we-stand-for/emporiatics>

Adapted from a blog written for the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, and originally published on 20 January 2021, <https://news.rcpsg.ac.uk/tag/travel-medicine/>