

Cllr Millard: Hello, welcome to episode 8 of Talk Richmond. I'm your host Jim Millard, and in this week's episode I'm very pleased to say I'm joined by Acting Medical Director of Kingston Hospital Amira Girgis, to discuss her experience during the peak of the pandemic and what the situation is like now in Kingston Hospital and with infection rates rising again, what we can all do as responsible citizens of Richmond upon Thames to help stop the spread of coronavirus. So, without further ado, I'd like you to give a warm welcome to you, Amira, thank you for coming.

Amira: Thank you very much Jim. Lovely to meet you.

Cllr Millard: Love to meet you too, how are you?

Amira: I'm very well yes. Happy to be here.

Cllr Millard: We're very happy to have you here. It's really excellent to be able to speak to you. I think this is a very important time to have this conversation. Can we start by asking to just tell us a bit about yourself and what your role is at Kingston Hospital?

Amira: Yeah, absolutely, so I'm a consultant in Anaesthetics and Intensive Care at Kingston Hospital, and I've been a consultant here for 16 years now. I took over as the Acting Medical Director at the beginning of April this year, so timing excellent as always in my life. And so now as a member of the senior leadership team, I spend a lot of time, you know, supporting the rest of the clinical teams in delivering really outstanding care.

Cllr Millard: It must have been very extraordinary moment to start and I wanted to just ask you a bit more about what that was like to remind us what the experience was like for those for you, for everyone at Kingston Hospital, for those on the frontline, of dealing with this during the peak of the pandemic back in April.

Amira: were quite lucky in Kingston. We could see what was coming over the horizon because it was hitting other hospitals before, we were quite slow on the uptake in the Kingston and Richmond area. So we had a bit of time to prepare and we spent a lot of time getting people trained up, making plans, getting our emergency response plans updated and ensuring that everybody knew what their new roles were going to be in terms of pandemic response.

Cllr Millard: What was the experience that kicks in hospital as cases did increase? What point did things peak for you?

Amira: So we as the pandemic progressed, what we saw was patients coming into the hospital with COVID-19 symptoms, as you'd expect. And we peaked probably middle of April in terms of the maximum number of patients we looked after at any one time. What we did see was a drop off in other presentations, so you know it was almost a single diagnosis hospital at that point. Everybody that was coming in had Covid and you know, a number of us were quite worried at that time about what was happening to all the other stuff that we would normally be seeing. The heart attacks, strokes, that kind of thing, they just weren't coming in.

Cllr Millard: And what's the impact in for those people with other health needs? And on the wider NHS?

Amira: So obviously you know we cancelled all the elective work quite early on because we were instructed to do so to create capacity to manage the Covid surge. And that was the right thing to do at the time, but obviously, you know that has an impact in terms of people who are then not presenting with symptoms that normally they would present with to their GPs or to the hospital. And that then has knock on effects in terms of the you know if they've got a disease process going on, it then gets more complicated to treat.

Cllr Millard: So what's your advice to residents who have other health needs?

Amira: So my advice to residents, whatever their health needs, are whether it's Covid or non Covid related is that if you've got symptoms that are worrying you that you think you would normally in normal times you would ask for advice from a doctor or another health professional is to go and ask that advice. And if obviously if you've got Covid symptoms, you need to stay at home and self isolate until you're told to come into hospital and present, either by your GP or by 111, but utilise 111 to get clear medical advice on the best course of action.

Cllr Millard: I can understand people feeling nervous and I feel like it's important to ask you. Is it right to say that GP surgeries are safe place to visit?

Amira: Absolutely they are safe.

Cllr Millard: and so if you're needing to go to the hospital, the hospital or the GP with something that's non-Covid related you should feel safe to go there.

Amira: You absolutely should feel safe to go. We've got lots of precautions in place. We've got separate areas in the hospital, the covid and non-covid type symptoms we are screening all people that visit the hospital were taking their temperature. We are issuing surgical masks obviously making sure people are sanitizing their hands. So the hospital is a safe place to come if that's where you need to be.

Cllr Millard: Thank you for clarifying that. I think it's really important and very reassuring to hear. I just want to hear a bit about what it was like for you and your staff on the front line, you know, we've heard quite a lot I think nationally about what the experience was like about people being very busy, having to work long hours, that sort of thing had. What was it like it Kingston?

Amira: You're absolutely right. People worked incredibly hard in very difficult circumstances. You know, wearing full PPE is hard work. It is tiring. It is not just uncomfortable, it's painful, and the nurses at the bedside in intensive care units were, you know, really hard working. And you know. And it wasn't just the ICU nurses working in that situation, we drafted in nurses from other wards and from theatres who weren't working because we weren't doing the elective program. We used our physiotherapists and other members of the staff in a in a, you know, a fairly flexible way. And and they worked really hard. There was quite a strong blitz spirit amongst the staff. Definitely running on adrenaline - all in it together. And people really appreciated the thanks that they saw coming from the community. We got lots of support from the community, lots of gifts, lots of thank yous, lots of cards and that was really appreciated. We had great volunteers who came round delivering drinks and snacks so that people who were able to take a break, you know, got fed and watered and all of those things together were really important to keep everybody mental state secure and everybody felt supported.

Cllr Millard: That's great to hear. I was there obviously clapping with everyone else on the doorstep on Thursdays and being very heartened as a counsellor to see our communities joining together like that, building our own Blitz spirit and trying to send that supports to you. I'm glad you felt it. And you know I would like to take this opportunity. I'm sure I speak for every single person in our community when I say again, thank you to you and all the staff for Kingston and in the NHS for everything you've done. I know it's been said before, but I'll say it again and I think there's no limits on the amount of times it needs to be said and will be talking about it for for many, many decades to come. Just about that time though, is there anything that really what you think is going to stick with you as a story or memory that that would be, you know, talking to people about in the future that really sums up what the experience was like?

Amira: So I think I think the sense of achievement of actually, you know, getting through this and and successfully getting patients through this, I'm reminded of one of my consultant in intensive care colleagues who unfortunately or fortunately was the first of us to have to incubate a patient and put on a ventilator because of the Covid symptoms in the hospital. And and she felt the weight of that really strongly. And understandably the patient was scared. But he needed the help that we had to offer him and she promised him she'd make him better again. He was with us for weeks

and weeks on a ventilator, but we did make him better. And when he went home there was a massive sense of achievement. And that's not just felt by her. That's felt by the whole hospital because the whole hospital supported the intensive care unit people came from all over the hospital. To work in the unit and help us to help these people to get better. So a massive sense of achievement.

Cllr Millard: That's a great story, and it's a real achievement. And having got through that stage of things, what things looking like now at Kingston Hospital?

Amira: At the moment, we are beautifully under control, as always, at Kingston. You know we are actively preparing in the background. We are like swans on the River Thames paddling away. So yeah, we know we've got all our plans in place. We've, you know, learned from the first episode at the pandemic and we know what worked and what we would do differently this time round. We worked really closely with our other providers across Southwest London to come up with a plan to be able to deliver all the Covid care that we need to deliver. But also keep all their elective planned work going at the same time because we need to make sure that patients who present with other things also get the treatment that they need.

Cllr Millard: That's really important point, the effects on everyone really needs to be minimized as much as possible clearly, and we don't want to go back to a similar peak. Obviously you have to prepare for it, but really, what we're feeling community, we're hearing that admission rates are going up. We know that transmission is increasing. What can we do as Richmond residents to stay healthy this winter and to help stop the spread of the virus?

Amira: Hands Face Space. Absolutely keep those hands clean, washing them regularly using hand sanitizers when you're out and about. Absolutely first line. You must keep those hands clean. Please, please please use face masks when you're out and about, and if you're in enclosed spaces, if you're going to be in a crowd where you're not able to socially distance to an adequate degree, then yeah, wearing a face mask is a precaution, and that's to protect others as well as to protect yourself. please use a face mask and then space - social distancing, it's really important. We're all people were all you know we're all humans and we've all got families and we're all suffering the same in terms of not being able to see family members. But you know, if the rules are that we can't mix households, please follow the rules. It's there for a reason. We've really got to cut down transmission between households.

Cllr Millard: well said. And as we move into the winter months there's been concern about the idea of a double whammy of sort of Corona virus and the flu. How important is it for people who concerned about that to get a flu vaccine?

Amira: Incredibly important. Every winter is a major problem for acute hospitals and intensive care units and I get I'm an intensive care consultant, I get my flu vaccine every year and I wouldn't think twice about it and I don't think twice about recommending it to everybody. So if you're eligible, please go and get your flu vaccine as soon as you're able to so that we don't have that double whammy of flu and Covid to deal with. And then we've got an opportunity to be able to keep services running for everybody's benefit.

Cllr Millard: Important thing, thank you for that excellent advice. Is there anything else you want to say to the residents of Richmond on Thames?

Amira: Just thank you so much for your support. It's really appreciated. We absolutely appreciate all those messages and gifts and just the thank you's and the positive feedback. And please keep yourself safe so that we can keep everybody safe and deliver the services that everybody else needs.

Cllr Millard: Amira thank you so much. Thanks for coming on Talk Richmond.

Amira: My pleasure. Thank you.

Cllr Millard: I hope listeners have found this episode useful. We're in a critical period in the pandemic and we've heard from Amira just how hard her staff at Kingston Hospital had to work the sort of hours they were putting in wearing protective equipment to the point where it's painful. I know that to protect them, we can put on a mask when we go into a shop or other enclosed space, or find ourselves in a crowd. We have to work as a community, no one is an island in this, and I know that we can all play our part to help stop the spread of the virus, protect the people round us, people we love the vulnerable in our communities and the frontline workers who continue to do so much for us. So please wear your face covering wherever you're in. Enclosed public space. follow the rule of 6, maintain social distance, keep washing hands. For further information on the topics discussed, check out the show notes below. If you have any questions please do feel free to email us on talk@richmond.gov.uk Please, as always, if you feel so moved to do so, please like and even leave a review that would be marvelous. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.