

'More Than Just Food' – A Reflective Essay

In March of this year I was deployed to a COVID ward at a busy West London teaching hospital. I remember the overt feelings of apprehension I had, mainly due to the images being broadcast globally of struggling hospitals and medical professionals crying out for help. What was I entering into? What was going to be expected of me? And could I actually make a difference?

On my first day the ward was unexpectedly empty – the silence was eerie and only broken by the nervous small talk from our medical team, meeting for the first time. As the days passed the ward started to fill. It began slowly, but the situation escalated and the ward of 40 patients was soon at capacity, as were multiple other wards around the hospital. The working days were long, they brought a lot of anxiety and sadness as we would unfortunately see many patients rapidly deteriorate without the comforting presence of friends or family members. My colleagues and I would try our hardest to enable patients to speak to relatives over the phone or via video call, bearing witness to many sad moments that were often final goodbyes. Team morale gradually declined as the days went on and the inflow of patients did not relent. I remember feeling a gross sense of fatigue and upset, as well as a stark unawareness of what the future held.

Whilst at home recuperating on a day off, a friend of a friend got in contact as he was made aware of where I was working. He informed me that he had started a charity that was providing food for NHS workers and asked if I would be willing to help. I agreed immediately. The charity, DeliverAid, has raised almost £100,000 from public donations and provides local restaurants in London, that were closed to the general public at the time, with funds to create meals by professional chefs for on-duty NHS workers. The charity is able to support struggling business by allowing them to remain open and use their skills and expertise to provide healthy and nutritious meals to key workers. He asked if I would assist with collecting the food and distributing it around the hospital. I was informed that a chef, 'C', would meet me the following day at 1pm in the hospital car park and to bring a trolley with me. I was intrigued.

The following morning on the ward was extremely busy and I nearly forgot all about it. Flustered, I met 'C' at the front of the hospital. Her car was filled with brown bags of hot, freshly prepared food – an immediate oasis at a time of madness. I thanked her as I filled a huge metal trolley, one that I had apprehended from the hospital's laundry department, with the seemingly endless bags that she had prepared that same morning. 'C' is a head chef

and owner of a private member's club in central London. She informed me that when her son was a baby he was extremely unwell and she would never forget how our hospital brought him back to health – this was her way of saying thank you. That initial short encounter with 'C' etched in me a distinct reminder of the kindness in people. After thanking her, I took the trolley and wheeled it into the hospital. Over the course of the next hour I would travel to the various COVID wards, one by one, delivering bags of hot food to staff. I would repeat this process three days a week over the subsequent three months.

I knew the food would be well received by staff but I could not anticipate the way in which it would permanently benefit hospital dynamics. After my first day of distributing food I returned to my ward's staff room with the remaining bags. I distinctly remember the moment when I entered the ward office and the staff (nurses, health care assistants, doctors, porters and domestic staff) sat down together to eat the same meal at the same time - something I had never witnessed before. We would talk about how good the food was, how comforting it was to have a hot meal and especially how nice it was to have dessert! This would lead to other conversations – what we liked to cook, what our hobbies were and most importantly, how we were feeling. We used this opportunity to share the events from the morning with each other, to seek advice and to give support. Colleagues on other wards told me similar things were happening. Teams were bonding and people were taking time out of the manic day to come together and just talk.

As the days rolled on, 'C' and I would share a short moment in the car park in which I filled my (the laundry department's) trolley and be amazed by 'C's' sense of altruism, giving up so much of her time to prepare food for more than 100 staff members with each drop-off. So, on three days a week I would walk through the hospital pushing the huge metal trolley, with its wobbly wheel that would rattle so much that people could hear me coming. It was this noise that people could sense from down corridors and literally come running to collect their bag. This was an opportunity to start a conversation, have a laugh, gossip or even just a moan. It destroyed any sense of hierarchy. The medical profession can often feel like a ladder and junior doctors and nurses can sometimes feel on the bottom rung. The food deliveries would help dismantle this as juniors and seniors alike would collect their food and eat together. I remember sitting next to a consultant I had always thought was slightly scary and being immediately disproven following a conversation in which he gave a group of us useful career advice. It also brought together those from the hospital management team, who we usually have much less contact with, and helped develop new multi-disciplinary relationships.

I must admit this process was not a complete act of altruism on my part. I would look forward to the days in which 'C' was coming with her car, food in tow. It would motivate me to work

hard in the mornings and add structure to my day, bringing a sense of satisfaction as I knew the positive effects it would have for staff. Food has always been important to me, I trained as a chef in the evenings after work during the previous year and I have always seen cooking as an opportunity to be mindful. I grew up in an Italian household where food was the centerpiece of family events and I witnessed from an early age how it brings people together. Food is a central part of so many cultures and communities and this is no coincidence. It creates opportunities to socialise, talk with strangers, share anxieties and ask for advice. Food as therapy, you could say – and if ever there was a time it was needed, it was now. And I haven't even discussed its nutritional benefit. The importance of good nutrition to health, both physical and mental, is being increasingly recognised in society. A balanced diet has been shown to help with weight loss, lower blood pressure, reduce risk of stroke and is associated with improved symptoms of multiple mental health conditions. Being overweight has been linked to worse outcomes from COVID. Somewhat paradoxically, health workers can often be the ones to miss out on nutritious food. Not through choice but rather as a result of the long working days, the reduced access to healthy food at work as well as the lack of time to prepare balanced meals between shifts. I was so used to grabbing a cold sandwich or even skipping lunch altogether, only to make me grouchy and miserable towards the end of the day. The food deliveries gave us an opportunity to recharge and reenergise, preparing us for a productive afternoon ahead. It felt like a reset button had been pressed, in which the stressors of the morning were processed, making us stronger as a result.

Although my personal time contribution was just a small part in this process enabled by the charity, it was a part that let me see the effects it was having on others first-hand. People would thank me for the food and say how much they looked forward to it - and I would remind them that I was only the delivery man. Staff members told me it made them feel cared for, something we are so well versed at doing for others and often forget about ourselves. The deliveries forced us all to take fifteen minutes out of our day and pause. It created an opportunity to be present, not needing to think about the past or future.

So what did I learn from this experience? I learnt that volunteering does not have to be a huge commitment, instead being a small moment out of your day to do something for someone else. I learnt that volunteering can help develop a sense of self, learning what is important to you and what brings you happiness. I learnt that small contributions can have unexpected effects that help build lasting relationships. And, perhaps most important of all, I learnt that this was about 'more than just food'; it was about creating a sense of community during a period of instability - using food to make us pause and come together (in a socially distanced way, of course).