

COVID-19 vaccination campaign: A tale of a volunteer on the frontline in England

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The United Kingdom kicked off its leading mass coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) vaccination programme by vaccinating the first person, Margaret Keenan on 8th December 2020¹ which was followed by many other countries.² COVID-19 vaccines were developed in less than 12 months after the pandemic began^{3, 4} and have offered hope of bringing normalcy back to many around the globe, but it is not without its challenges.^{5, 6} The infrastructure of coordinating frontline response and the development of confidence among various communities to accept vaccination posed significant challenges. This required input from governments, healthcare professionals, the media, and importantly the public who play a vital role in not only accepting the vaccines and busting the myths but also actively volunteering for this great cause.

After watching my father, a frontline COVID-19 healthcare worker, receive the vaccine and at the same time sensing the reluctance of some family and friends to take the vaccine, despite the pandemic hitting Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities disproportionately, I felt energised to play my role. When I saw an exciting opportunity for volunteering for this noble cause coordinated by my school, Bolton School, I promptly put an application forward in February 2021. The whole process was streamlined, and soon afterwards I embarked on volunteering at the Bolton Wanderers Football Club vaccination centre.⁷ There was some initial anxiety about contracting COVID-19, but I discussed it with my mentor and was reassured about the safety standards of the vaccination centres.

I was pleasantly surprised to see a range of roles for a non-clinician volunteer including being the face of the vaccination programme by greeting patients, explaining the vaccination process and allaying anxieties, handing out written information, managing patient flow, ensuring maintenance of social distancing, checking temperatures, and liaising with clinical staff. There was also an element of an administrative role and keeping the registers. However, what I found most fulfilling was to talk to some of the patients who said that they had been socially isolating for several months and were excited to talk to someone face to face. One could see a sense of liberation the vaccination was bringing to them. It was a truly humbling experience to go out of my way to support some of the BAME patients, and speaking to them in their native language to make the whole

process a memorable experience. I remembered one elderly lady who seemed distressed as she could only communicate in Hindi and I was fortunate that she allowed me to take her through the whole process and later assist with arranging transport.

I am going to continue with my volunteering on weekly basis and I found that it revitalised me for the rest of the week to engage in my full-time academic studies at school. This being my first work experience, I must admit the shifts were well-paced, lasting 4-5 hours and not too demanding. I was made to feel safe, and the senior members of the team would regularly communicate and offer me guidance and support.

Working closely with clinicians helped me gain new insights into the importance of true multidisciplinary teamwork in healthcare. I appraised it as the epitome of how colleagues with a unique set of skills, and driven by a shared desire to bring about a real difference to people's lives, strived together selflessly as a team. Furthermore, it was inspiring to observe the leadership of the senior volunteers acting as role models with their professionalism, unflinching dedication to their job and willingness to proactively offer support to others. However, the watershed moment that shaped my thinking to take on medicine as a career was the reward I got from the empathic interaction with patients and gratitude in their eyes. It was pleasing to see in practice the Good Medical Practice⁸ attributes of working collaboratively with colleagues, professionalism, communicating effectively, and treating patients with dignity.

I have been feeling proud to be at the frontline working shoulder to shoulder with my clinical colleagues in this battle to end the pandemic. I would highly recommend vaccination volunteering to others as it is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of so many.

Competing Interests

None declared

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