

The Lab Says It All

When I heard of this virus, I knew that I would be very involved as a Senior Medical Laboratory Scientist. I started mentally preparing myself, reading up, and looking into testing, but there was not much to go on because of such a novel virus.

We outsourced all tests initially, worked very hard and quickly equipped our lab for in-house testing. As a cardiac care hospital, we needed to have our patients' Covid test results as soon as possible, so we wanted to do it in-house.

There was a lot to prepare - we were not trained for molecular testing, had limited staffing and had to wait for supplies like the analyser machine, the reagents and other testing paraphernalia, and had to follow many guidelines and regulations.

Thankfully, the set-up was quite fast, and I managed to start in-house testing on 1 April 2020. Now, 20 months on, we have done more than 25,000 tests.

We handle between 60 to 80 PCR tests per day now, while it was up to 300 each day at the peak!

The whole testing process and lab work is very meticulous; there are protocols for each step. The PCR test is also susceptible, and the slightest foreign materials or cross-contamination derail the process and the findings.



Pn Noor Zaitulakma Md Zain

We aim to get the test results out within 6 - 8 hours and a maximum of 24 hours because we had to decide how to manage the patient as soon as possible. The chain of information for positive cases includes the clinical staff and wards, IJN Covid Task Force, the OSH unit and the management.

As I am in charge of validating and releasing the results, I have to work from home too. I also have to report on the total swabs, tests and results from IJN, upload them to links in MySejahtera and SIMKA for national counting every day, and keep abreast with the very fluid KKM guidelines.

On top of Covid-related work, which is about 35% of my work, I am also in charge of Microbiology and infectious diseases and technical management of the lab, and I still do weekly ward rounds. So from the work perspective, yes, the workload has increased tremendously, and the safety and PPE requirements have made it even heavier as it is very cumbersome, restrictive and uncomfortable.

This is the greatest communicable disease we have seen in our time, and it has changed everything. We all know and have experienced the difficulties this virus has brought us, so let's focus on the positives here. I, for one, am glad to see people eating more healthily, exercising more and are more aware of this safety and surroundings. It is also great that families have more time with each other because of the MCOs.

To say that it has been challenging, I think, is an understatement. This thing came at us from nowhere and had us all - especially the medical fraternity - scrambling. It is a heavy responsibility, and at one point, it was a hefty burden.

Thankfully, my husband and two kids have been very supportive. We have managed to find our equilibrium, and we support each other - all these have helped me and our family weather the difficulties. On top of that, my boss and colleagues also never back off. They always there to support everything relates to this virus. And now, I can see it as my contribution to the well-being and safety of others.

Hello... IJN On The Line



Pn Sharinawaty Rahim Jabba

"On any normal day, IJN's call centre receives some 500 calls. However, in the early months of COVID-19, the hospital was fielding some 1,000 calls each and every day! Our phones literally rang non-stop!" - says Supervisor, Call Centre **Pn Sharinawaty Rahim Jabba**.

So, there we were, dealing with our own reactions, worries and concerns about the pandemic and handling anxious and troubled patients simultaneously. It was an experience like no other.

The management allayed our initial panic and consternation early on, and we were confident that they had our best interests at heart. The next step was to ensure that we looked after ourselves as best we could, as only then could we be of service to others. So, it was important that we ate well, exercised, relaxed and had a good downtime with family. This is what I also emphasised during morning briefings with the call centre team.

Work-wise, it was more vital than ever that we maintained a positive attitude alongside cool and calm professionalism and kept a smile on our faces. There are 10 of us in the call centre, and we were split into two groups, taking turns, as the room we had then was relatively small. For us, there was no working from home, although we were put on standby.

We definitely could not handle 1,000 calls a day, so when the barrage of calls descended, we had help from staff from other units which were closed who were seconded to help us.

Each one of us would handle 100 calls a day at the height of the pandemic, many of which were patients who were anxious about doctors' appointments or asking about medicine collection, SOPs and vaccines. We also multi-tasked, communicated with patients via emails and WhatsApp and did counter duties.

We all went the extra mile to make sure our patients' needs were met and that we supported each other. We could not share food and socialise as usual, but we made sure we had each other's backs.

While the pandemic is not something I would wish on anyone, it did open our eyes, and I feel that the different work we did, the pressures and challenges have taught us a lot and honed our skills further.

As for home and family, my two children are very understanding, and they know not to come to me until I have changed and had a bath. It has been good to spend quality time at home with the family, instead of going out as we usually did.

Was I scared? I don't think I was ever scared of the situation, just cautious and maybe a little apprehensive. I managed to take it all in my stride, with support from colleagues and my family.

Thankfully the workload has eased. Although our role at the call centre is relatively small in the whole scheme of things, I am glad that I have uplifted my team and supported the hospital in its fight. It was also good to be a conduit between the hospital and the patients, answering their questions, allaying their fears, and handling their issues.

