

## My Covid-19 Story

Karen Thorp

I know where I got it from! On Monday 9<sup>th</sup> March I went to choir practise as I always do. It's a large choir, about 120 people in a church sitting close together. I have since found out that 22 people in the room have been poorly with Covid-19, including my friend who I was sitting next to. 5 of those, including myself, ended up in hospital and sadly, 1 of those, a man in his 40s, died in hospital. I think it safe to say that I caught it that evening.

Exactly 7 days later, on the evening of Monday 16<sup>th</sup> March, I got my first symptom, a scratchy throat, and decided I should self-isolate. By the Tuesday evening I felt as though I had been hit by a double decker bus and over the next few days my temperature gradually rose, fluctuating between 38° and 40.2°. I didn't lose my sense of taste or smell and I only had a bit of a cough, but I did lose my hearing, which I wasn't aware of at the time (my sister has told me since how I couldn't hear her from the other side of the pavement when she dropped supplies off, and when I went back to my flat and turned the TV on it was on full volume and I had put the subtitles on!).

The days leading up to Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March are a bit of a blur. I couldn't eat much, felt achy and generally awful and had diarrhoea. There are whole periods of time and things I did that I don't remember. I have evidence on a message thread between myself and my sister that I phoned 111 for advice at one point, but I have no recollection of doing this. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March I was particularly delirious and my Mum and both my sisters tell me that they were increasingly worried about me due to my responses to their calls and messages and were considering calling 999 on my behalf. There are 2 videos on my phone on that day where I had pressed record without knowing I had done so. The first begins with me laying on the floor beside my bed and you can see my leg on the video. I then move the phone on to the window sill and during the rest of the video you can hear me moaning and groaning and trying to get up from the floor. I have no recollection of either how I ended up on the floor or my attempts to get up. The time on the video is just before 4 in the afternoon. At 5 O'clock, my brother-in-law left a bag of supplies on my doorstep and sent me a message letting me know it was there, which I replied to and remember doing from the sofa. He then left to go home. The next video is mostly just black but you can hear me attempting to get up from the sofa, talking to myself and even berating myself for not being able to do it. The time on this one is 11 minutes past 5. I don't remember this situation either! I do remember going to the door to fetch the bag of supplies, but the next thing I knew, I was on the floor beside the steps, screaming and there was what seemed like a lot of blood coming from my face. I had clearly fallen straight forward onto my face when I bent over. A neighbour was then sitting behind me and I was leaning against him, his wife brought a blanket for me (I was only wearing a dressing gown) and another neighbour was on the phone calling for an ambulance. I remember a paramedic arriving in a car and then a big ambulance arriving. I also remember getting up from the floor and heading into the flat but then I remember nothing until I began to wake up from sedation in Intensive Care more than 3 weeks later. I did phone my sister from the back of the ambulance, and over the next 24 hours in Watford

General Hospital I sent some photos to my family, the photos are on my phone, but I have no recollection of any of this.

I was on the AAU ward at Watford until early morning on the 25<sup>th</sup> March. They had given me Oxygen and put me on a C-Pap machine which had appeared to be working for a while. However, in the early hours of Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> March I was moved to Intensive Care, sedated, intubated and put on a ventilator. My family were informed that a “Do not attempt resuscitation” order had been put in place as, if my heart had stopped, there would be no point in attempting to restart it. Thankfully, this was later rescinded as I grew to be more stable. On the 4<sup>th</sup> April, Watford Hospital were having some issues with their oxygen supply and so I was transferred to Addenbrookes Hospital and admitted to the Intensive Care unit there. During my time on the ventilator I was also put on kidney dialysis, I was turned onto my stomach (into the ‘prone’ position) several times and received a red blood cell transfusion. On the evening of the 7<sup>th</sup> April the decision was taken to give me a tracheotomy so that the sedation could be safely reduced, which was done during the 8<sup>th</sup> April. I only know all of this because my sister kept careful notes.

My experience of waking up in the ICU is perhaps the most surreal experience of my life. I have never taken drugs but I was convinced that I was in some kind of drug induced dream state or that someone was playing a very bizarre trick on me. The main image I have of that time is being in a relatively small room. There was a door in front of me and I remember seeing a note on the door with a phone number to use to contact the nurse in charge. In my image the number has several 4s and 3s in it. There was a large square on the wall which had the date ‘Sat 11 April’ on it. This never changed. There was a clock under the date which was changing, sometimes very rapidly, and because the date never changed this fed into my delusion that I was dreaming. There was a computer in the right hand corner that had a nurse sitting at it and typing a lot. Through the open door I could see some other beds and there were always lots of nurses walking back and forth. It seemed to me that the same nurses were walking back and forth using the same routes over and over again, reinforcing my belief that I was dreaming or it was some kind of elaborate hoax. Not that I knew they were nurses..... They were wearing full PPE I now realise, but all I was focused on was the white masks over their mouths and noses which in my head had red lips on them reminding me of the Japanese cartoon “Hello Kitty”.

I realised quite quickly that I couldn’t talk and could only move my legs, which added to my belief that I was dreaming. Also, as often happens in dreams, things were changing from one second to the next, (I now realise that this was because I was slipping in and out of consciousness during the days the sedation was leaving my system). One second I was lying on a bed, the next I was being put into a hoist and lifted, which I found extremely uncomfortable and painful but couldn’t say anything! At one point I heard 2 of the nurses talking and one said, “Don’t worry too much, she is hard of hearing, she can’t hear you”. Of course, I may be remembering this incorrectly, but I do remember it scaring me because I couldn’t tell them I could hear them, all I could do was kick my feet to let them know that I was there. Talking of my feet, for most of the time I had what I would describe as ‘Beckham Boots’ on my feet. They were open at the top and had fur on the inside. They were very hot

and I didn't like wearing them at all. The nurses removed them every now and then, which was bliss, and I resisted having them put back on but didn't win the battle. I remember doing this and one particular nurse told my Sister on the phone that I was very 'determined'! I remember being constantly thirsty. Occasionally a nurse would give me a pink sponge soaked in water and I would suck at it as hard as I could. At one point, the nurses showed me a grid with different pictures on and asked me to point to what I wanted. I remember repeatedly pointing to 'thirsty'!

Another overriding memory of that time is of sitting in a chair rather than lying on a bed. I had an i-pad attached to a metal arm in front of me. Playing on the i-pad were episodes of "The Great British Bake Off" and old episodes of "Top of the Pops" from the 1980s. I distinctly remember that Jason Donovan was number 1. My sister was told by the nurse on the phone that I was mouthing along to the words of the songs. This was a great relief to my family as they knew this meant that my brain was functioning! I remember a Physiotherapist coming and getting me to sit on the side of the bed. I couldn't hold myself up and there was someone sitting on the bed behind me to support me. It was a really strange sensation and I just didn't understand why I couldn't do it.

I can remember the tracheotomy being removed as there was a big rush of air, but I don't think I knew exactly what it was at the time. Not long after this, the nurse brought a phone over telling me that my sister was on the other end. I can't quite remember what I said but I remember her sounding upset, telling me that everyone was sending me so many messages of support and that she and everyone loved me. I remember wondering why she would be calling me and why she sounded like she was so far away, I still didn't really understand that I was in hospital and that it wasn't a dream. As far as I was concerned, if I was in hospital then my family would be there with me not on the end of the phone. I had no idea at the time about Covid and the no visitors rule. I don't remember this ever being explained to me.

Now that the tracheotomy was removed, I was able to drink orange and apple juice and eat yoghurt, fed to me by a nurse, nothing had ever tasted so good. I can remember trying to grab at the naso-gastric tube in my nose, and the nurse sitting at the computer getting up and coming to move my hand saying "you need to leave that alone, it is keeping you alive".

I think the first time I really began to realise that I wasn't dreaming and actually was in hospital was when I was transferred to the main ward. They put a mask on me which was horrible to wear. The trip from ITU to the ward seemed to be a long one with lots of corridors and more than one lift, but when I was taken into my room I was very happy to see a lovely view from the window. There was another lady in the room with me for the first 24 hours or so, who was crying a lot. While she was there, the curtain was drawn next to me and I couldn't actually see out of the window. I was now beginning to realise just how weak I was but refused to believe it. I couldn't use my hands to grip any cutlery and the nurses were having to feed me. My phone felt like it was made of lead and I struggled to hold it. My bed was right next to the bathroom but I didn't understand why the nurses wouldn't let me get up and walk to the toilet, instead, making me use a bedpan which was very uncomfortable. I remember getting very cross and shouting at some of the nurses (which I

am now horrified to think of). I also got cross with one particular nurse when she was feeding me. She was trying to get more food in my mouth before I was ready and I said to her "I'm 51 years old, not a baby, I will tell you when I'm ready for the next mouthful"!! (In fact my language may have been more colourful than that!). I was having to choose very soft food that didn't need chewing too much, my mouth was very dry and if I tried to eat, for example, a sandwich, then it took forever to chew the bread and for it to go down, so I avoided choosing this kind of food.

I was on the ward in Addenbrookes for 2 weeks before being transferred back to Watford on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> May. It was a room with 3 beds in it and I was on my own after the first 24 hours. Once the other lady had gone I asked if I could be moved to the bed next to the window and I was which meant I could at least see a bit of the view. I had nurses coming and going to do observations and to give me bed baths etc., and had visits from Occupational Therapists and Physiotherapists. All of the staff were lovely and helpful and if I needed to press my call button someone always came very quickly. However, I spent a lot of time on my own with no one to talk to. I realise how busy the nurses etc., would have been, but the most frustrating thing was needing to know what was going on. I would ask questions about, for example, when the doctor would be doing their rounds, what was the latest development with my move back to Watford etc., and the nurses would say they would find out for me and then I wouldn't see anyone for another hour or so and be waiting on tenterhooks for the answer to the questions. Inevitably, I wouldn't even see the same nurse again to find out if they had even asked the question and so would have to start all over again. I really do understand how busy everyone would have been, but from a patient's perspective, just making sure you come back within 5 minutes either with an answer or even just to say that you haven't been able to find out the answer, would make all the difference.

Learning to sit up, stand up and walk again was extremely hard work, each session of physio felt like I had spent an hour with a personal trainer, but once I got going my progress seemed to be relatively quick. Once I had been transferred back to Watford, I was able to have conversations about being allowed home. My sister and her family had agreed to have me staying with them until I could be more independent but I had to be able to climb 14 stairs before that could happen! On Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May, on my first attempt, I only managed 2 and was rather despondent. I thought that might mean I would have to be transferred to a re-hab facility until I could manage the stairs. However, on the Monday I managed 9 stairs and on the morning of Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> May I did all 14! I have never pushed myself that far in my whole life, but it was worth it, my sister and brother-in-law picked me up and took me home that same afternoon.

I am so grateful to my sister and her family for putting up with me for the next few weeks. My sister in particular was a saint; she helped me shower, get dressed and undressed etc., and kept pushing me to do more and more for myself. I joked that she started off being Florence Nightingale and quickly turned into Attila the Hun, but it was exactly what I needed! For example, one particular day I needed to go to the toilet and my walking frame wasn't right in front of me. My sister said, "why don't you just see if you can walk those few

steps without it?" I did and she then kept moving the walking frame further and further away from me until I had walked all the way to the toilet without it! The encouragement and love I received from my whole family at this time, not to mention from a whole load of good friends, was invaluable and something I will treasure for the rest of my life.

I have now been out of hospital for 16 weeks. I am back living independently at home full time and am looking forward to going back to work on a phased return in a week's time. I can walk short distances without a stick. However, this isn't completely over for me. I have a very painful shoulder which I am having physio for. I get a variety of general muscle pains, particularly when I go for a walk. I am losing my hair in handfuls which is very distressing. I have 2 numb fingers on my right hand and my right thigh is completely numb and sometimes painful. Alongside the physical after effects of this horrible virus are the psychological ones. I have lived on my own for my whole adult life and have always been relatively happy in my own company. But now I don't want to be on my own, at least not all the time. However, I also find it very difficult to ask for people's company, assuming I will be in the way, they'll get fed up with me very quickly and so on. I'm finding it very difficult to shake off the survivor's guilt. It's very difficult to see news reports that talk about the number of people who have died and not wonder what is so special about me that I survived and they didn't. I'm also struggling with the fact that I am not able to sing the way I could before all of this. Singing and performing is my lifeline to good mental health and I am worried both that I may not be able to do it to the level I could and that generally amateur singing and theatre could be affected for a long time to come by this virus.

Having said all of this, I am extremely happy to be alive and more grateful than I could possibly express to all the NHS staff who saved my life and looked after me during my 6 weeks in hospital. I am even more grateful to my family and friends who have shown me such a huge amount of love and support during all of this. I am determined to live a life that makes me worthy of them.

Thank you for reading my story and stay safe!

Karen Thorp