

# The tale of a Covid 19 survivor

It was around 2.30pm on Friday 25<sup>th</sup> Feb when Trevor Jones and I packed up our papers, said our goodbyes to the rest of the CUKPA committee members, picked up our small handy overnight suitcases and made our way from the meeting in Marylebone to Paddington for the long trek home. We meandered through the busy streets as London, indeed the whole of the UK hadn't really become aware of the Covid pandemic that was to hit the country with such force as to paralyse the nation for a very long time. After around 30minutes of strolling on the streets, constantly sidestepping to avoid contact with other pedestrians we arrived at Paddington. We were unusually early on this occasion so we settled down for a cup of coffee and snacks while we watched endlessly the train arrivals and departures on the scrolling boards, reflecting on the meeting and our own future plans. Paddington was thronging with people on this particular day, much like any other day really but there appeared to be a sense of unease over the place which didn't really make sense to me at the time.

Trev and I boarded the train, settled in to our seats opposite each other and glanced to see if we were going to be joined by other passengers. Thankfully there were 2 green lights up on the electronic notice board above our table which meant we had the table all to ourselves, a good thing as Trev loves to spread the newspaper and do the Times crossword on the way home, while I make a start on typing out the minutes of the meeting. Many people were still brushing past us when the train finally departed making their way to their allocated seats, a nuisance at times when you get stuck by the odd rucksack swinging around, or elbow to the head as the train veers to the left or right, oh the perks of public transport I mused as finally the wave of depressed, red faces finally stopped marching by.

A little over 3.5hrs passed by when we pulled in to the quaint town of Neath, I say quaint as to give it a real adjective, partly to encourage you all to visit our splendid country, and partly to not build up your hopes of arriving in a swish, fancy or jazzy town. Suffice to say it is representative of most towns in the UK and leave it there. It is with deep intrepidation when arriving in Neath that I always have to stand up prior to arrival in order to see if my car is still in the same parking space where I sadly said my goodbyes to it the previous day. There can be nothing worse than getting off the train and finding your only

'means of escape' has already been used by someone else as their 'means of escape' .....apologies to the residents of Neath here, that should read 'means of leaving this quintessentially Welsh quaint little town'. Anyway, we headed to the car and set off home. Some 2 hrs later, I dropped Trev off at his home in Pembroke and I returned to gods chosen acre, a quintessentially quaint little town called Milford Haven!!

Upon arrival my wife noted I seemed tired, I put it down to travel, early mornings, hotel air con, city walking etc etc, . That week to me didn't feel much different save for a tad more tired, again put down to late nights, early mornings etc. A week flew by at the speed only retirees will be aware of and similar feelings of tiredness were felt. The following week I volunteered to do some painting work in the offices of a local charity organisation along with six other fellow friends from my masonic lodge. No, some were taller than me so we weren't the seven dwarfs but we did manage to get a lot of painting done in hearty spirits.

Another week again shot by and it was time for me to travel to Spain on my prospective son in law Richards stag weekend. This meant a friend of mine and I staying at a hotel near the airport prior to flying out, we met the other 8 folks at the airport the following morning and flew to Bilbao. The next three days were quite eerie as Spain was headed into lockdown, almost all of the shops were closed, some bars stayed open along with a few restaurants. Our excursion and tour of the football stadium, and the museum were cancelled as the lockdown took effect and on the last night there we stayed in the hotel, unable even to play pool amongst ourselves as the staff didn't want us to touch the cue.....

Bilbao airport was spookily eerie, some passengers wearing masks, others not, ourselves included. There were no shops, duty free or restaurants open save for one small shop which sold drinks and sweets. We were one of the last airlines out before total lockdown and it suddenly dawned on us how serious Spain were taking this. We flew back into Bristol into a haze of spray from the easy jet staff, waved through by minimum staffed customs officials and made our respective ways home.

About 30minutes into the journey I developed a cough. This didn't seem like your normal cough but rather a dry persistent barking cough similar in nature to croup. After a few minutes of coughing it eased a touch to which I said jokingly to my travelling partner that I have the lurgy, and whats more, he will

get it too. We travelled several miles on until we reached the next service station where I stopped for coffee and a cold drink. This seemed to have an effect as it certainly eased the coughing fits I was now suffering rapidly from.

We arrived home some 3hrs later, I walked in and as my wife came forward to give me a hug I stopped her and said better not get close as I think I had 'the bug'. I unpacked my case and went straight into the spare room and went off to sleep, tired but contented to be home, this niggling cough still barking away intermittently throughout the night. The following morning and from a safe distance, way before safe distancing became the 'norm' I agreed with my wife that it might be best if I stayed with the future son in law for a week in isolation and my daughter came to our home to stay. We also had my mother in law staying with us, 88yrs of age and I understandably didn't want her to catch this virus, if indeed it was the virus.

I moved in with Richard, and the following few days were awful, my temperature was skyhigh, my wife had given me a thermometer to use and it was recording 40 degrees plus. I shivered violently with the cold whilst sweating profusely with the heat, the cough became constant, my body ached permanently, the fatigue of being unable to sleep was beginning to overpower me, towards the end of the week I just wanted to die. Yes, I could only see one way out of this and may god forgive me for wanting to give in so quickly but this was unbearable. Finally after 5 days I could take no more, I rang 111, and waited, and waited. 82 minutes later and the ringing stopped, I had been cut off without answer, I was at my lowest point and no one was helping me.

Friday night passed and probably due to the exhaustion of the preceding 5 days I must have slept some, night became day and day became night. All I know is I woke up to the strangest feeling. I felt ok, no cough, a little warm but on the whole, a lot better than the previous night. Thank god I never got through to 111 was all I could think about, how stupid would I have looked and felt this morning, a fraud, taking up some other poor unfortunate victims bed or time. I said to Richard I was headed home and he seemed surprised but at the same time no doubt relieved that I was feeling better and more importantly, my daughter could now move back in with him.....

My wife was startled when I walked in through the door, we had spoken every night, she kept wanting me to ring 111 or 999, I insisted we didn't. My daughter said her goodbyes and returned to her home, some 500 yards away from us. All was well I thought, it turned out I was wrong in a very big way.

Within 2 hours of being home, I was back in bed, the sweats, the aches, the coughing, the high temps had returned with a vengeance. The big difference that first night home was the hallucination, the most horrid dream in which I witnessed multiple bodies floating in a hotel pool abroad. My wife jumped off the 14<sup>th</sup> floor balcony to rescue a dead baby from the pool, fully dressed for dinner, floating down and re emerging from the pool clueless of the others floating in there and now wearing a bathing costume. This prompted me in the morning to ring 111 again, my wife on one phone, me lying in bed cuddled up on the other. It took 40 minutes before one of our calls got through.

The voice on the other end of the line seemed to want so many answers to questions that I felt she was immune to my problems, what did I feel like, when did it happen, first symptoms, where had I been etc etc. All I wanted was help and here I am answering question after question to someone who has no doubt been repeating the same old questions for hours on end. Finally, after what appeared to be an inordinate amount of wasted time, she mentioned that a GP would be in contact with me within the next 4 hrs.

I am not sure whether it was scepticism on my part but sure enough just as the 4 hr deadline approached, the phone rang, a GP asked similar questions and advised me that she would contact my own GP who would then be in touch .....within 4hrs. I didn't care at this stage, I was 'in the system'. The next call came within 2 hours, an appointment was made for me to visit my own GP surgery the following morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, strict controls meant my wife Mandy and I had to drive to the rear of the building and ring the surgery to say we were outside.

Usually when I visit the doctor, my wife insists on a fresh set of clothes, washed and smartly presented, on this occasion all I had on were pyjamas, slippers and as it was March, a jacket. With all credit to her, she knew my state and never said a word about my state of dress. I felt like the walking dead making my way to the car but ever hopeful this horrid time would soon be at an end, some magic potion or pill and hey presto, back to my normal joyful active self.

The doctor summoned me to the rear of the building, via a back doorway to an isolation room. He was all gowned up, mask and visor, I had to hand gel on the way in, a bit over the top I thought but hey, what did I know, indeed what did I care as long as he was going to sort me out. We went into a quite small room, he instructed me to remove my jacket and pyjama top and began to examine

me. He noticed a rash on my stomach and asked how long it had been there, not a clue I answered weakly, had I been putting a hot water bottle there, not a chance as I explained my sweats etc. After a few minutes of probing my stomach and a few more questions he asked me to get dressed and return to the car and wait. My wife then proceeded to ask loads more questions not knowing that I really didn't feel like talking, I just wanted to either get rid of this bug or die, yes it was getting like that again.

After some 10 minutes wait, the doctor rang my wife to say that she needed to take me directly to our local A&E dept. Finally, I was going to get cured, my feelings of wishing to die subsided somewhat, little did I know what the next stage of this virus was to do to me.

Upon arrival at the A&E dept, some confusion occurred. We were told to go straight to the temp tent accommodation specifically set up to greet suspected Covid 19 patients. There were contractors still erecting the tent, it was open to the elements with a single bed inside and workers constantly back and forth. Surely this couldn't be where I am to receive the magic treatment? I became depressed as we looked around trying to find someone to talk to. My wife went into the main A&E reception. The receptionist informed her that she needed to make an appointment, fill in loads of paperwork etc and that she had to leave, in an almost hysterical manner. Thankfully a senior nurse arrived and asked my wife was I the person the doctor had rung through previously. I was summoned inside to sit and wait. My wife was told she couldn't stay so we waved goodbye, tears in both of our eyes down most likely to the fear of the unknown. Little did either of realise what was to come.

After a short while sitting on my own, by now my breathing had become a lot more difficult, sort of panting like a dog when its too hot. It is a horrid feeling not being able to get enough breath into your body to relax but I felt contented I was in 'the right place' my suffering would soon be fixed.

I was taken into an examination room by a nurse, again gowned with a visor and mask, all this for a simple fix.....I had wires attached and she merrily chatted while she conducted some tests, blood pressure, temp etc. She then left me alone in the room. An hour or so passed, my breathing by now was getting worse, and when the doctor came in and started asking me questions and probing I felt strangely anxious and relieved. Anxious that he hadn't seen my notes or why is he asking me the same sort of questions and relieved that he was going to 'fix me'. He immediately noticed the rash on my stomach and

mentioned it was a typical symptom of Covid 19. I had a swab taken and he left. Another hour or so passed and then whoosh, I was leaving A&E to be transferred to my own room on the Acute Clinical Decision Unit or ACDU. I was transported on the bed, to x ray dept for chest and body xrays and deposited back to the unit. I rang my wife to inform her I had been transferred and was being kept in, she arranged for some clothes and phone charger etc to be brought up for me which Richard did within the hour. My recollection of the next period was very sketchy, I thought I had been in there for a few hours, it was Mandy who advised me I had been in there 4 days. I do clearly remember being at a stage where I was quite literally gasping for breath, my lungs felt so clogged I could barely breathe, my thoughts again turning to wanting to die to relieve the pain. I also clearly remember the moment my assigned consultant came into my room and announced they were going to put me to sleep, put me on a ventilator and transfer me to intensive care. I was delighted, a strange feeling to have when told you need to be on an intensive care ward however I was going to sleep, something I hadn't had for almost 2 weeks, I wouldn't consciously have to worry about my gasping for air, I was finally free from this damned virus.

Of course, whenever there is a positive, there usually follows a negative. Within seconds of being delighted, I was brought to earth with an almighty bump. The consultant then asked me if I wanted to be resuscitated. What do you mean I enquired, I am alive now. He casually mentioned that they had no idea which way this 'thing' was going to go, it could go either way and he needed to know whether I wanted them to bring me back from the dead should the need arise. From wishing to die in the previous moments my thoughts immediately turned to survival. My initial thoughts were, jeez Dennison, this is serious, you have a problem and you need to deal with it. Although totally fatigued, adrenaline kicks in and I replied they could do whatever it needed to bring me back. Once agreed things happened rapidly, the consultant disappeared and within minutes came back to say they were going to put me to sleep. Not yet I replied, I need to ring my wife and daughter and say my goodbyes. After what seemed a tsunami of tears had flowed, we all said our goodbyes as I couldn't be sure the outcome would be positive, the last words ringing in my ears from my wife urging me to "fight it, fight it with everything you've got", my daughter continually chipping in through her tears telling me how she loved me and urging me to "pull through dad, I love you". I switched off the phone, the doctors did their magic and as I fell asleep, I felt my problems disappearing slowly.

At this stage I have to rely on my wifes account for what happened except for one vital stage.

I was transferred to intensive care, on the ventilator and she called twice a day to ask about me. Critical but stable was the reply for the first 5 days. All sorts of drugs were put into me to treat the virus and alleviate the temperatures which by now were over 40+. A very close friend of ours who worked at the hospital popped up to the entrance door of the ward every day and shouted for me to fight fight fight. I am sure the nurses tending to me thought this amusing to begin with but anything goes when a patient is on intensive care. On Thursday morning of day 6 in intensive care my wife had a call at 1030am to inform her she needed to prepare for the worst. I was very very poorly; my organs were shutting down and it wasn't looking good.

Prior to all of this, we had discussed our deaths and had made wills and all the usual stuff associated with death. I had previously prepared a spreadsheet with all our finances contained within, hyperlinks to all accounts etc etc, a simple way for my wife to manage without me, or so I thought!

She had received masses of texts, emails, phone calls from friends and relatives during this time, constantly repeating the message hundreds of times whilst looking after her mother of 88 yrs who suffered from vascular dementia and alzheimers. These messages helped her immensely throughout this whole ordeal, sadly she too contracted Covid virus shortly after my admission, thankfully a milder bout than me but enough to impact her health too. Drained and exhausted, the last thing she needed was this phone call but she had to deal with it, and deal with it now.

At this stage of the story I will regale you with my knowledge of what happened to me in intensive care.

I was walking in this beautiful meadow, grass hills in front of me, towards the clearly marked up Corona Virus Bus Stop at the bottom of the grassy hill and in front of the lovely farmhouse with tables and chairs outside. In the distance at the top of the other grass hillside I saw a Landrover being followed by a silver car. That's strange I thought, why are they driving on the grass, well, if the car gets stuck at least he will have the Landrover to pull him out. As I made my way to the bus stop, I could see the bus pulling away. Dammit, now I will have to catch the next one. Continuing to walk down the hill to the entrance to the big farmhouse, a gentleman appeared from nowhere and asked me where I was headed. Going to catch the bus I replied but it's just pulled off, I will get the next one. He told me that was the last bus for today and I could stay overnight in the farmhouse and catch the next one in the morning. I agreed to

go with him. We walked through a lovely arched entrance and on passing I noticed a pasting table with all sorts of rings, watches, ear rings etc. I asked the man what they were and he advised me that they belonged to the Coronavirus victims and help myself if I wanted. I politely declined, we made our way to the farmhouse and he showed me to a dormitory room where there were 4 beds in a row either side of the room. Take any bed he informed me, I will be back for you in the morning. As he shut the door behind him, I noticed there was no handle on the inside, I couldn't get out if I wanted to now.

I lay on one of the beds determined to get a good night's sleep. As my head touched the pillow, all I could hear was what can only be described as a ventilator noise, whoosh bang, whoosh bang. This went on for what seemed an eternity, I had only been down for 2 minutes!! Cursing myself for getting locked into a place I was unfamiliar with and unable to sleep thanks to the constant noise I became anxious to leave, and leave soon but I was trapped. A period of time passed and I heard the door handle opening. I thought it was my time to go but no, the same gentleman was now showing another person into the room, advising him to pick any bed that he wanted. As they both had their backs to me I took my opportunity and slipped out of the now open door and made my escape. I thought I would be better off waiting in the bus stop in the peace and quiet rather than stay with the constant noise so I began to make my way there. At this point in time I heard my daughter Katy shouting at me. She clearly stated 'for gods sake dad, don't be late for the wedding, get in the silver car. As if by magic, the silver car I had observed earlier on my way to the bus stop pulled up alongside me and the door opened. I got in. My next recollection was being talked to by a nurse asking me did I know where I was to which I replied I didn't have a clue!

My wife having had the call on Thursday morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> April had to wait until Friday evening at 5.30pm for the next update. The phone went and she answered it fearing the worst. The doctor asked her if she was sitting down, being a newly retired nurse of some 40yrs experience she knew it was good news, medical staff don't say things like that between themselves when it's not good news. The doctor apologised for leaving so late to call but he wanted to be sure of what was happening. He told Mandy he was unable to describe why but a miracle had occurred, I was pulling through and was stable. They had no idea why but Mr Miracle was back and had chatted to the nurse albeit very weakly. This news filtered through the county immediately, a huge sigh of relief was heard all over. I was the first Covid patient in the intensive care unit and I had made it. I spent the rest of the following day being fussed over,

washed , checked and checked again and the following evening I was transferred to a covid isolation ward where my rehabilitation began.

Rehabilitation, a long word for a long recovery. At first I had what appeared to me to be Parkinsons disease, my hands trembling vigorously making it extremely awkward to drink or eat, my sense of distance was totally confused, many times the drink was spilt as I thought I had it near my mouth or my hand was clasped round it only to start shaking out of control. My taste buds were shot to pieces, suddenly coke tasted like orange squash which tasted like water which tasted typical of hospital, it was awful. Every foodstuff tasted the same, horrid but in order to leave I had to eat. The nursing staff were brilliant but also clever, my disguised attempts at putting the serviette over barely touched food never went unnoticed and so, the protein drinks were introduced, which had to be witnessed taken. Oh how I wished I had eaten the hospital meals, they were gourmet compared to the protein shakes. Of course the tubes into the nose/mouth area also compounded the problems of eating and many times I had to summon assistance to replace the tube..... Time for the catheter to be removed, wow does that hurt too. Then its getting out of bed to go to the loo, well the commode really, legs weakened I almost fell over getting out of bed, but with determination and the aid of a zimmer frame, yes not even 60 and having to use a zimmer to walk, I made it. Then of course you had to summon the nurse when you finish, enough said there. After 3 long but fun days in the ward my dreams came true, I could go home. I hadn't had a shower in almost 2 weeks although I did have a wash on the ward, I was so looking forward to that, I was up early, waited for ever to get 'signed off' and Mandy was there to give me the hugest of hugs and wheel me to the car. We arrived home and two little children had made several welcome home signs for me which were posted in the windows which immediately set the tears rolling down my face.

In the ensuing 3 months, I have made good progress, walking limited distances daily although the lungs have scarred due to the virus and the ventilator so I get quite breathless doing small jobs or walking up slight hills. Hopefully over time this will heal somewhat. My sense of smell has finally almost returned to normal and likewise my taste too. I have thankfully managed to get out on the golf course, albeit using my buggy for now. I have been interviewed by two TV news channels ITV and ABC news Australia and also a radio and local press and had features in all 4. Sometimes I get tearful and somewhat slightly depressed especially at the deaths announced due to the virus but this is countered by the joys of even more survivor stories.

We all think 'it will never happen to me', I did, it did, and it could happen to you. It really is like Russian roulette. I had no underlying medical issues which were often used to describe deaths from Covid in the initial stages and this gave me this comfortable sense of immunity, if I was going to get it, then let's have it and move on. How wrong I was and how wrong we all are, this virus has no common entity other than its mission to destroy with maximum impact as it can. Stay safe, stay home wherever possible, keep up the safe distancing, wear the masks and protect yourselves.

Ps. My daughter was due to get married on the day after my recovery and the day I left intensive care, the wedding had already been postponed until next March.