

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond with me, your host Jim Millard. For this week's episode, I'm joined by the Chief Operating Officer at Kingston Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Mairead McCormick to talk about the situation in hospitals, with staff shortages and high COVID-19 case numbers. So Mairead, am I saying your name correctly?

Mairead McCormick: Yes, it's Mairead. Thank you.

Cllr Millard: Mairead, I didn't do too badly, so apologies. It's a lovely Irish name and thank you so much for joining us. I imagine you're incredibly busy at the moment, so thank you so much for making time to do this. I suppose to start off it would be great to just start with a bit of an introduction to yourself. And if you can tell us a bit about that and your role at Kingston Hospital.

Mairead: Sure, of course. Well, thank you for having me firstly. So, I am the Chief Operating Officer at the hospital and the Deputy Chief Executive. And I suppose in summary I am responsible for the delivery of services, of all services at the Trust and also for managing the people and supporting the people that deliver those services. That's a fairly rounded summary of what I do.

Cllr Millard: Thank you, thank you very good, very good. And recently we've been hearing a lot about the impacts of the Omicron variant and that's creating staff shortages with high case numbers leaving many hospitals with critically low staff numbers as people get sick and have to self-isolate. So, I wanted to ask what has the situation been like at Kingston Hospital with staff absences?

Mairead: Yeah, so, it's certainly taken its toll on the workforce. It's increased their workload significantly because there have been a number of gaps across all services. It's also, you know, decreased people's capacity to do extra because as this has gone on for an extraordinary length of time, people have been less resilient and doing more and doing the extra becomes much more challenging. We also accept that it's affected people's own health and wellbeing both physically and mentally, and we're very aware of that, uh, where people become more fatigued and, as I say, less resilient, so we've had pockets of, you know gaps in workforce. It's got better and then it's deteriorated again with the recent strain, and I'm pleased to say today it's an improving picture as of a couple of weeks ago. So that's good news.

Cllr Millard: That is good news. And is it affecting, just staff who would be acting you know, interacting with people who might be presenting with COVID? Or does it affect the whole staff body across the hospital?

Mairead: I mean it, it affects absolutely everyone. It's not just front facing staff, it's people who are in supporting roles in corporate roles. Also, you know people who are working in the ISS services which is our supporting services for cleaning and catering etc. So, the whole breadth of staff of everything that relates to delivery of services and hospital you can imagine is impacted.

Cllr Millard: but it's good to hear you saying that over the last couple of weeks, sort of since the new year that you feel that things are starting to improve a bit.

Mairead: Yes, definitely.

Cllr Millard: And I wanted to ask about in terms of patients, what is the COVID situation like more generally at Kingston? How many COVID patients are currently occupying hospital beds?

Mairead: Yes, so for today for example, we've got 75 patients in the hospital with COVID. Five of those are in the intensive care unit. But that's a very different picture, than what we had, for example, on the first round, which was many, many more patients in the hospital. Those numbers

haven't really changed an awful lot in the last couple of weeks, but they're certainly not increasing, which is a good optimistic sign. So yeah, 75 patients today, and that's remained fairly static.

Cllr Millard: I don't know how important is to say whether they're Omicron variant or not, but do you get that sort of information?

Mairead: We do get that sort of information, and I think it's important for people, obviously, in the scientific world and the modelling and impact of vaccination and stuff. In terms of our service delivery, it's actually less important because the treatments are there or thereabouts. There are some differences and treatments, but in terms of you know, isolation and infection, prevention and control the standards are fairly, you know, consistent all round no matter what variant. So, yes, we do know the information, but it doesn't impact on service delivery.

Cllr Millard: In terms of treating them. I mean, we've been very fortunate to have some fascinating conversations before on this podcast with people from Kingston Hospital and with a nurse who had himself become very ill with COVID and benefited from I think a CPAP hood, if I'm remembering that correctly?

Mairead: Yeah.

Cllr Millard: I'm just wondering if the ways of treating you know we've learned over time, does that help in the treatment? What we've learnt over the last couple of years?

Mairead: Yes, I mean, I'm not best placed to talk about the in-depth treatment regimes, because certainly my clinical colleagues would give a much better summary of the impact of treatments. But definitely treatments have changed, obviously. As we know more about the disease process, and there's every indication that the treatments are becoming more and more effective, as time goes on.

Cllr Millard: That's very good to hear, and I wanted to ask of the of those 75 patients at Kingston, are you able to say how many of them are unvaccinated?

Mairead: Yeah, so the majority of patients in the intensive care, the more severe illness, certainly this time round, the majority are unvaccinated, and that has remained fairly consistent. In the main body of the hospital, you know, it can be 40-50%. And it may also be that they haven't come in with COVID, but actually they just happen to have COVID, but COVID is not what's driving their admission to hospital. It just so happens it's secondary and they've got it. But they may be there for another reason.

Cllr Millard: OK, OK, I see. Well that that is very interesting though, isn't it? I think we've touched on, you know, the difference to last year, how the situation was. But it's interesting how this interacts with the general demand - because as I would as I think I understand you know all hospitals in the NHS kind of experience increased demand in winter months in general, and I'm sure a big part of planning is about preparing for winter pressures accordingly. But combined with the current surge with the Omicron variant in COVID cases must be extremely challenging. So I guess an important question is: what can we all do to help make things easier for the NHS, knowing that your staff are working so hard with all the additional pressures?

Mairead: Yeah, well, I think the first thing to say is to, you know, have your vaccine. Whether that be COVID, Flu, COVID and flu, to have both. That's clearly effective. I think the second thing is to, you know, to use services appropriately and not just think that A&E is the only option. There are many, many options out there, particularly for less severe illness and minor injury and illness. We've got our walk-in centres; we've got obviously NHS 111 and pharmacy are a fantastic resource for

managing minor ailments. And I think the third thing to say is, you know if you do have to use the services, treating staff come with respect and dignity is really important. You know we've seen a rising amount of violence and aggression towards staff. So, a reminder that it's really important that we treat everybody with respect and dignity. And you might have to be a wee bit more patient than previously, because obviously the demands are greater.

Cllr Millard: I'm really horrified to hear that you've seen in the increase in violence and aggression. I mean, where do you think that's coming from? And over what period has that increased?

Mairead: So, I think we've certainly seen a rise in that in the last year. I think you know people are becoming less tolerant. I guess the pandemic has taken its toll on people's lives in general, frustration and angry at you know, with the situation and often, you know that manifests itself in behaviour towards staff. But it's a reminder that actually we all need to treat each other with that respect and dignity. I expect staff to treat patients that way, but I also expected vice versa.

Cllr Millard: Yeah, absolutely. We're all just trying to get through this together and exactly so really important message so. Uhm, I suppose. Finally, I just wanted to ask how, how are you all coping at Kingston Hospital? I think that's the story, you know when we first started talking about this, it was a new thing. It was a massive national emergency, and everyone threw themselves into it with the most amazing dedication. And I think what we're all aware of really concerns us as a general public, is that you, you know, you just had to keep doing that for just so long and so how are you coping with what you might see this repeating cycle of COVID-19 and what it what a staff able to do to try and support each other and try to help with that sort of side of their own wellbeing.

Mairead: Well, I suppose the first thing to do is actually to acknowledge that people have been through a really difficult time, and I think that acknowledgment alone is helpful for people and that you know, you understand where they're coming from. And within that acknowledgement you also have to build in time for people to recover and have some rest time and downtime. I mentioned earlier about, you know there's less ability to do more as time has gone on and people's resilience wanes. We also actually acknowledge that you know people are not just employees, they have families, and they have many factors going on outside of their role in the hospital. So just an acknowledgement and understanding of you know where people are coming from and what's going on in their own lives and what we can do to support. We've got an enormous health and wellbeing program wrapped around input for staff, many things that they can access to help them get through this. I think because there is more optimism, you know, since the vaccine, you can see light at the end of the tunnel. You know the numbers are not increasing in the hospital makes people feel better because they know it's going in the right direction. So, there is a general more sense of optimism, sharing that information with the staff so that they see the totality of the picture improving as they say, gives people hope. And we're very cautious that we ensure people have adequate time to rest and recover. IE that they have their annual leave when they can have their annual leave. Sometimes we have to slow things down to enable that to happen and just acknowledge that we can't do everything. Staff are great support for each other as well because they're experiencing similar things, so staff support groups and networks is an important element of this. But I think fundamentally acknowledging that we know that this has been really, really difficult for everyone. There are great services through the NHS as well for support with counselling services etc. So many, many things available to staff, but we but we recognise this is going to take time. This is not a 24-hour recovery. This is much longer for every individual.

Cllr Millard: And it must be so difficult for you. You know your role in sort of trying to plan and make sure you have the resources, and your staff are in the you know in the right place to manage what

might come next. It'd be nice if you had a crystal ball I suppose. Do you have any sense of what the next few months is going to be like for Kingston?

Mairead: Yeah, so look, I think it would be wrong to say it hasn't been difficult. It's certainly been very, very challenging and probably the most challenging time of my whole career to date which is, you know, 34 years in the NHS. But I think I don't do it alone. I have a fantastic team, we're all in it together. Everybody adds something to that and we've not only just the Kingston Hospital team, but we work as a wider team across southwest London. But I think we've got into a battle rhythm of how we're managing this and that is something that is well rehearsed at this stage.

Cllr Millard: Well said, it's been fascinating to talk to you. Thank you for giving up some of your precious time to come and talk to us and giving us this real insight into how Kingston Hospital is coping with the Omicron variant and the pressures it's put on your staff. Thanks for coming.

Mairead: Thank you for having me.

Cllr Millard: Each and every one of us owes the NHS staff a massive debt of gratitude. I'm sure we're all aware of that. It's the continued commitment that they're all putting in and having to put in in a sustained, ongoing way that is, you know, it's been said before, but I'll say it again. It's nothing short of heroic, and we owe it to all of them to do our bit by getting vaccinated, getting boosted, isolating when needed, working from home where possible, wearing our face coverings and you know, I think another message that's come out of this is just being nice to each other - that's really important. So that's it for today, feel free to subscribe and as I always say, if you can. If you're on the sort of platform that allows you to do, leave a five-star review, I think that would be very nice as ever. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.