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PRIMARY COLOUR

Helen Salisbury: Everyone wants to feel useful

Helen Salisbury *GP*

It's been a hard year. As we're bombarded with daily images of desperately ill patients and exhausted intensive care staff, it's not surprising that we're fearful and anxious. The pandemic has left many people feeling helpless, cut adrift from the activities that gave their life purpose and meaning, whether that was work, volunteering in the community, or interacting with friends and family.

Even if you are furloughed and being paid at least some of your wages for doing nothing, such inaction can be deeply depressing. At a time of international crisis people want to get involved, to feel useful—which is difficult when the public message is that “the most helpful thing you can do is to stay at home.”

Some of us in general practice have also struggled with feeling a bit useless. While our colleagues in hospitals are coping with large numbers of very ill patients, we're trying to continue our normal work but without our usual tools, and we miss the sense of connection with our patients. We've found it difficult to adapt to mainly remote consultations, and although we're doing our best, it often doesn't feel good enough.

The vaccination programme has been a welcome shot in the arm for general practice. For the first time our primary care network has come together with enthusiasm and a clear, shared sense of purpose. Everyone is keen to be involved, and we have more staff wanting to work at each vaccination session than we can possibly use. Receptionists, admin staff, doctors, nurses, and community volunteers are all queuing up to play their part. The work itself isn't difficult or complicated; on a superficial level, it's not even very interesting. But it's probably the most practical and helpful thing any of us will achieve this year, and both we and the patients know it. The atmosphere of goodwill and hope pervading the surgery during vaccination clinics gives us a psychological boost that can stay with us for days.

Will it last? All novel experiences dull with time. When lockdown eases and we can do more at the weekend—beyond the same local walk or another box set—will the enthusiasm for extra shifts wane? We're still uncertain about our vaccine supply, and there may be new hazards as the virus mutates. But, for the moment, it's genuinely a pleasure to stand in our scrubs and plastic aprons, in a draughty waiting room, asking the same questions and performing the same simple procedure again and again. We know that we're the lucky ones: it's hard to beat that feeling of working in a team, doing something that everyone recognises as hugely useful.

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