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Covering covid-19: stories from *The BMJ*'s news desk

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The covid-19 pandemic has been the biggest public health crisis of a generation. The avalanche of media around the disease-19 has been dubbed an “infodemic.” Anyone can turn on their smartphone and access more information on the covid-19 outbreak than they could consume in a lifetime. Although other groups of essential workers hit headlines, it might be easy to forget the group of key workers who put them there—the journalists and editors who produce the media we consume. *BMJ Student* spoke to *The BMJ*'s news and features team to hear about their experiences of covering covid-19.

Rebecca Coombes, head of news and views

“It’s been frantic,” says Rebecca Coombes, head of the news and views section of *The BMJ*. Coombes leads *The BMJ*'s small in-house team of staff writers, as well as a network of freelance journalists. “I’ve been a health journalist for 25 years and have covered some of the biggest stories—such as the MMR [measles, mumps and rubella] scandal—and this is just beyond any of that,” she continues.

For *The BMJ*, says Coombes, it’s been important to continue as normal as much as possible. “*The BMJ* is a legacy title,” she says. “It’s been in continual publication since the 1840s—it continued being published even when we [the BMJ office at BMA House in Euston, London] took nearly a direct hit from one of the 7/7 bombers. There’s a real pride in keeping the show on the road.” Unsurprisingly, *The BMJ* has been busier than ever since the pandemic began, with the website experiencing record breaking traffic in April.

Adjusting to home working hasn’t been without its challenges. Pre-pandemic, the journalism team worked from *The BMJ*'s office, allowing the team to share stories and contacts and bounce ideas off one another. “I think naturally journalists are quite social animals and might not be ideally suited to working mostly alone at home,” says Coombes. *The Press Gazette*, a trade magazine for journalists, reported that four in 10 of their readers felt lockdown working had affected their mental health.¹ Coombes says that journalists are highly resilient, but the nature of the job is such that it’s often difficult to escape from the constant churn of distressing news. “You are working on these stressful stories all day and you can’t really get away from it in the evening. It’s hard to get it out of your head.”

Reflecting on the key stories of the pandemic, one of the most important themes for Coombes has been the lack of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) supplied to healthcare workers. “For our readership, the real scandal has been PPE. There have been a lot of broken promises,” she says. *The BMJ* launched a

campaign in March 2020, using #properPPE on social media, to help highlight the stories being reported by frontline healthcare workers. “I think doctors really feel that they have not been properly protected, and doctors should be given whatever they need to make sure they feel safe—there should be no quibbling about that.”

Mun-Keat Looi, international features editor

“The pace has been the number one thing that has been hard to keep up with,” says Mun-Keat Looi, international features editor at *The BMJ*. It’s not just the speed at which the pandemic itself is moving, he explains, but the effect that it’s having on people’s worldview. “9/11 is probably the only other event that comes to mind—something that completely changes the lens through which we view normal life. In England we’re used to generally feeling quite safe, and we take for granted things like global travel and supply chains,” he says. In some ways, every story is a covid-19 story, Looi says, “There won’t be any shortage of stories—it’s just figuring out what’s most useful for our readership, what’s not been covered.”

The media spotlight suddenly being shone so brightly on the world of health and science has been interesting, too, “Everyone is on our lawn, in a way. All sorts of journalists are covering science and health. The fact that things like “PPE” and “flatten the curve” are now common parlance is incredible. In many ways it’s an exciting time,” he says, “It’s exciting, but there’s just been so much of it. *The BMJ* isn’t like the *Guardian*; we don’t have hundreds of international reporters, just five or six of us working from our bedrooms.”

Zosia Kmietowicz, news editor

For Zosia Kmietowicz, news editor, coverage of covid-19 across other media outlets has, in some ways, changed the strategy for the news team. “The nationals have started covering health to an extent that wouldn’t usually be expected, so they become our direct competitors in a way,” she says. *The BMJ* has been focusing on the practical problems that doctors are facing at the coalface, she says—a big theme has been around the lack of access to testing for frontline workers.

Keeping up with a news landscape that is constantly changing is a challenge, particularly when working on news stories for both *The BMJ*'s website and the weekly print issue. “Some news stories have a short life,” she says, “so when you’re planning for the print issue that’s tricky, because we have to plan 10 days in advance.” However, because *The BMJ* is a specialist outlet with a specific readership, there’s more freedom to think creatively about how to report news

to extend its shelf life, such as question and answer pieces.² “It’s been enjoyable doing pieces like that because it means we’re not competing with, you know, the *Times* to get all the news out,” she says.

“I think everyone is working hard—you just have to get on with it.”

Elisabeth Mahase, clinical reporter

“It’s one of those weird things as a journalist,” says Elisabeth Mahase, *The BMJ*’s in-house clinical reporter, “that horrible things can be happening, and you understand that on a personal level, but career-wise—you’re reporting history, you’re part of something bigger. You want to make sure you get it right because more than ever it really matters what you report.” For a specialist health journalist, reporting on big events like disease outbreaks or health scandals represent milestones in your career. “It’s been the first big one for me,” says Mahase.

With covid-19’s impact on daily life in the UK, Mahase’s work has spilt over into everyday life in a way she’s not used to. “I’m not a doctor, so normally the medical world is a world I report on but am not part of,” she says. “This is different, because when you log off, it’s still the rest of your life.” For journalists who are visible on social media, particularly Twitter, there’s a lot of pressure to be constantly communicating, she explains.

Another challenge has been reporting on papers that have not yet passed through the traditional scientific publishing process.

“Normally as a journalist I have a reasonable safety net, as *The BMJ* usually only reports from the top five journals, where everything is peer reviewed, and I can be confident that it’s good science—but I don’t have that now.” That’s meant adding an extra layer of critical appraisal to the pieces she’s writing, which isn’t always easy: “I do make mistakes, and I have made mistakes, but the next day there are 17 more stories to write, so you just have to learn and move on.”

Competing interests: see bmj.com

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1 Tobitt C. Four out of ten Press Gazette readers say lockdown working has harmed their mental health. *Press Gazette* April 2020. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/four-out-of-ten-press-gazette-readers-say-lockdown-working-has-harmed-their-mental-health/>.

2 Rimmer A. Covid-19: what do trainees need to know? *BMJ* 2020;368:m1276. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m1276.