The BMJ

kabbasi@bmj.com Follow Kamran on

Twitter @KamranAbbasi

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;372:n809<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n809>

Published: 25 March 2021

O leader, where art thou?

Kamran Abbasi *executive editor*

What's the role of a medical leader? What's needed to head a college, medical association, or health service? Is it about supporting colleagues who experience unprecedented levels of abuse and violence from frustrated patients?¹ Is it about charting a clear path to revive training affected by the pandemic, as Clara Munro and colleagues argue?² Is it about tackling institutional discrimination, as the Royal College of Surgeons must now do,³ or protecting staff wellbeing,⁴ or solving access problems in primary care?^{5 6}

Many good doctors aspire to being medical leaders⁷ but never quite reach the top. Some bad ones do. Reaching the pinnacle isn't necessarily about your abilities. You arrive at the top, whatever your merits, only by playing a shrewd game of medical politics. But when you get there, in touching distance of awards and honours, and with the power to act, what path do you choose?

Covid-19 thrust medical leadership into the brightest light. Medicine is the new rock'n'roll, as one award winning magazine editor recently told me. Both public and profession grappled with the little known—from assessing personal covid-19 risk to managing acute respiratory failure, on both of which we offer updates.^{8 9} Whether it is the disputed value of prophylactic hydroxychloroquine or the controversial merits of delaying a second vaccine dose,^{10 11} medical leadership was rarely more in demand.

But politically inconvenient voices are often sidelined, such as public health leaders who call for clarity in plans for public health,¹² or concerns that some people drop their guard too quickly after a first vaccine dose,^{13 14} or demands to regulate the freedom with personal data that the pandemic unleashed.¹⁵

Questioning official policy is dismissed as disloyal rhetoric on the part of the high priestesses and priests of hindsight. As self serving as Dominic Cummings might be,^{16 17} enough people predicted the extent of the danger of covid-19 at the outset, a cost that the Health Foundation now estimates at 1.5 million years of life lost in the UK.¹⁸

Where were medical leaders in these debates, in the UK and worldwide? Yes, many did wonderful work reorganising services, maintaining staff morale, and arguing for personal protective equipment. But where were they in the public debate? When the crisis was on us, too many kept their heads down, avoiding confrontation.¹⁹ Leadership for too many amounted to not rocking the boat publicly. Perhaps they were rolling with the punches in private, winning arguments, saving thousands of lives?

But the fact that we don't know what many stood for is indictment enough. Where was the public challenge to authority, where the open debate for

services and patients, disadvantaged populations and minorities? Where are the commissions and inquiries into the pandemic response? How will history judge medical leaders of countries worst hit by the pandemic? When they were expected to lead, did too many fall back on medical politics and the prospect of future gongs? Staying in the room where it happens comes at a price, and that price is your perceived integrity.

- Oxtoby K. Another epidemic: abuse and violence towards doctors from patients and the public. *BMJ* 2021;372:n739. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n739.
- Munro C, Burke J, Allum W, Mortensen N. Covid-19 leaves surgical training in crisis. *BMJ* 2021;372:n659. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n659. pmid: 33712499
- Mahase E. Royal College of Surgeons of England is failing female, ethnic minority, and LGBT+ members, finds review. *BMJ* 2021;372:n751. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n751. pmid: 33731326
- Rimmer A. Covid-19: Doctors must be allowed to rest and recover for patients' safety, says BMA. *BMJ* 2021;372:n777. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n777 pmid: 33741557
- Rimmer A. Patients have struggled to access general practice during the pandemic, Healthwatch reports. *BMJ* 2021;372:n798. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n798. pmid: 33753343
- Salisbury H. Helen Salisbury: Hanging on the telephone. *BMJ* 2021;372:n786. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n786.
- Jones H. Inspiring future leaders: infectious diseases consultant Leann Johnson. *BMJ* 2021;372:n746. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n746 pmid: 33753357
- Finnikin S, Spiegelhalter DJ. What is my covid risk? *BMJ* 2021;372:n637. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n637. pmid: 33727236
- Attaway AH, Scheraga RG, Bhimraj A, Biehl M, Hatipoğlu U. Severe covid-19 pneumonia: pathogenesis and clinical management. *BMJ* 2021;372:n436. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n436. pmid: 33692022
- Lamontagne F, Agoritsas T, Siemieniuk R, et al. A living WHO guideline on drugs to prevent covid-19. *BMJ* 2021;372:n526. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n526 pmid: 33649077
- Pimenta D, Yates C, Pagel C, Gurdasani D. Delaying the second dose of covid-19 vaccines. *BMJ* 2021;372:n710. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n710. pmid: 33737404
- Griffiths SM, Jewell T, Rae M, de Gruchy J. The future of public health in England. *BMJ* 2021;372:n662. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n662 pmid: 33722795
- Rubin GJ, Brainard J, Hunter P, Michie S. Are people letting down their guard too soon after covid-19 vaccination? *BMJ Opinion*. 18 Mar 2021. <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/03/18/are-people-letting-down-their-guard-too-soon-after-covid-19-vaccination>
- Day M. Covid-19: Stronger warnings are needed to curb socialising after vaccination, say doctors. *BMJ* 2021;372:n783. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n783. pmid: 33741565
- Stokel-Walker C. How health data have been used during covid-19, and whether the changes are here to stay. *BMJ* 2021;372:n681. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n681.
- Iacobucci G. Sixty seconds on... Dominic Cummings. *BMJ* 2021;372:n791. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n791. pmid: 33753423
- Cowper A. An ARIA of revenge, sung by Dominic Cummings. *BMJ Opinion*. 19 Mar 2021. <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/03/19/andrew-cowper-an-aria-of-revenge-sung-by-dominic-cummings>.
- Health Foundation. 1.5 million potential years of life lost to COVID-19 in the UK, with each life cut short by 10 years on average. 23 Mar 2021. <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/news/1.5-million-potential-years-of-life-lost-to-covid-19>.
- Jones B. The medical establishment is failing the UK public on covid-19. *BMJ* 2021;372:n775. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n775 pmid: 33753358