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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;378:o2017<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o2017>

Published: 17 August 2022

ACUTE PERSPECTIVE

David Oliver: The overwhelming reaction to my personal covid story

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I recently used this platform to describe my personal experiences of working on covid wards through the pandemic, my own subsequent illness as a result of covid, and my decision to withdraw from the presidency of the Royal College of Physicians.¹ In the seven years that I've been writing this column, I've never had anything like the reaction that this one provoked. It wasn't just the metrics on page views, downloads, or social media shares but also the volume of private direct messages, emails, and letters I received.

I'm still very sad about my withdrawal from a role I'd worked hard to be elected to and was looking forward to. It's left a big hole in my plans for my late career. I'm still not sure when I'll be declared fit enough to go back to my clinical work. And I'm still worried that, when I do go back, those feelings of being overwhelmed and burnt out will still be there.

The responses, however, offered me some powerful learning.

Firstly, the act of my talking openly about my personal experience and vulnerability seemed to help and resonate with many other doctors and nurses. I imagine that I'm not everyone's idea of "vulnerable." I'm a big, burly man in his late 50s with 33 years' experience in the job, with all kinds of senior leadership roles behind me, who worked right through two years of the covid pandemic without getting ill or taking time off. So, if I was writing about how exhausted I was, others felt more able to admit this too. I'd made a deliberate decision to put my wellbeing and health first—over and above career ambition or presenteeism—and this seemed to resonate with readers.

Secondly, when readers shared their own experiences of burnout, long covid, or other illnesses, including sickness and tragedy in their own families, it put my own problems into context. I had so little to worry about, compared with much of what other people shared with me. My correspondents have made it very clear that health, home, and family life are far more important than careerism, presenteeism, or ambition. Like other ambitious, workaholic medics who are defined by their professional life, I'd clearly been getting things the wrong way round.

Finally, the reactions made me feel good about the impact of writing this column for all of those years. At least I can now carry on writing, without worrying about whether my views are at odds with the official stance of any institution.

Competing interests: See bmj.com/about-bmj/freelance-contributors

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

¹ Oliver D. David Oliver: My personal pandemic experience is just one of many. *BMJ* 2022;378: <https://www.bmj.com/content/378/bmj.o1761>;doi:10.1136/bmj.o1761.