

West Suffolk Hospital ward manager: 'It's frustrating when people say Covid-19 is a hoax!'

As the nation approaches the one-year anniversary of entering lockdown, a local nurse shares her experiences of working first-hand with coronavirus patients. By **Danielle Lett**

With the nation on full lockdown, and with recorded cases of Covid-19 currently peaking higher than spring 2020, members of the medical community say they are stunned at the number of people coming forward as 'coronavirus-deniers'. In Suffolk, where some of the UK's largest rises in infections have been recorded, ward manager Rosie Cawston of West Suffolk Hospital says she's frustrated by non-believers, having witnessed first-hand every day the toll this pandemic is having on the NHS, as well as local families.

"I have met people who are sceptical of Covid-19 – but it is very much real, and it's frustrating when people say it's a hoax or 'blown out of proportion'," she says. "I go on social media and see things where people are carrying on like normal, but I think if people worked just five minutes on any NHS ward at the moment, they would soon change their minds. I have witnessed first-hand the implications it has not just on staff at the hospital, but on patients and their family, too."

Rosie, who graduated from Anglia Ruskin University in 2012, began her nursing career at Addenbrooke's Hospital before moving to West Suffolk Hospital in Bury St Edmunds in 2019.

"Since then, I have hit the ground running, working in a new trust in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic," she says.

When case numbers started to rise in April, Rosie's ward was

designated to treat infected patients, and has been used throughout both waves of the ongoing pandemic. "We received a bit of respite from this at the end of summer, but cases began rising at an alarming rate in November, and that's when we switched back to being a Covid-19 ward."

Rosie explains that she, like many others, is feeling the strain within the NHS due to the number of patients being admitted with Covid-19. "I don't think anyone knew how long the pandemic would last, and this continues to be a challenging time for NHS staff. For example, the numbers of Covid admissions and how dramatically they have risen in recent weeks is frightening," she says.

So what is an average day like for a nurse on a Coronavirus ward here in Suffolk?

"The way we work has changed, as we have to prioritise our workload differently." On top of regularly

having to implement new procedures across her ward, Rosie and her colleagues are required to constantly wear PPE during their shifts. Surgical masks are the bare minimum, along with gloves, aprons and visors.

"For some procedures, we need to wear additional PPE such as fit-tested masks and gowns. Staff have to change this every time we have any patient contact, and hand hygiene is also really important."

"Staff can suffer from dermatitis from washing their hands so much, and I have forgotten what it's like to see my



Rosie Cawston, also pictured inset left, is a ward manager at West Suffolk Hospital and has been working with Covid patients throughout the pandemic

Pictures: WEST SUFFOLK NHS FOUNDATION TRUST

colleagues' faces without a mask on!"

Life as a nurse during a pandemic is demanding enough as it is – but there are a number of extra challenges that come with the job.

"Patients who have a cognitive impairment often lack the understanding of the virus and why we are wearing all the PPE. Although it is essential to wear it, it's hard to provide that reassurance, comfort and support to patients when they can only see your eyes through a visor and you are having to hold their hands with gloves on."

"Patients also don't have visitors like they would do normally, so staff are becoming the people that will hold their hand to the end. As a result, it is taking a toll both emotionally and mentally on staff. It is relentless."

With a number of staff off sick, shielding or isolating, those who are on shift at the hospital must remain flexible at all times.

"It really does continue to be a multidisciplinary team approach including nurses, doctors, discharge planning teams, therapists and pharmacists, with everyone getting involved and supporting one another so we can

provide the best care for our patients. Staff often come in on their days off and are doing additional shifts because they want to support their colleagues."

Rosie, along with a countless number of nurses, doctors and hospital staff, is not only putting her physical health on the line every day – but also her mental health. "Like a lot of people I know within the NHS, I often struggle to sleep before a shift, something I have not struggled with before. I also now have anxiety about what the day ahead holds. Like other NHS hospitals, we have experienced a high number of patients pass away due to Covid-19. It is desperately sad. On Christmas Day, on what would normally be a festive and joyous time, we sadly had five patients die on our ward alone."

Rosie adds that staff at West Suffolk Hospital have access to a psychological wellbeing team service, with members regularly visiting the ward to check in on employees: "As a ward manager, I have an open-door policy and I am always at the end of phone should my colleagues want to talk about anything. At the staffing huddle at the start of a shift, it is my opportunity to check in with staff

and see how they are doing. Like most wards, we have a really positive team spirit – to pitch in and help one another."

With some members of the general public becoming complacent due to ongoing lockdown restrictions, Rosie asks that we don't give up just yet, and have faith in the vaccine rollout currently taking place.

"Initially, it did feel that we were no further forward than we were in March. However, I need to remember that we have climbed this mountain and we are nearly at the top. The vaccines will make a difference - we need to hang onto this. I've had the vaccine and I know a lot of my colleagues are signed up and eager to have theirs."

In the meantime, Rosie asks that the public follow government guidelines and stay at home, to not only help the NHS, but the wider community. "Everyone at the Trust is trying their best, and it is really challenging, but the public needs to be patient with us. We are continuing to adapt to an ever-changing situation, and I know the NHS is made up of people who are strong-minded and carry on despite everything that's going on."





West Suffolk Hospital in Bury St Edmunds. Five people died here from Covid-19 on Christmas Day alone

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