

Around the Wards in 80 Days

Derek Walsh – A Covid Survivor's Story

Firstly I must apologise but the names of the very many fantastic and devoted people who cared for me from beginning to present have not been personally named in my story as there would be far too many to name, and it would also be unfair to single out any one person above all the others when each and every one of you have played your part in my treatment, care and recovery from this dreadful pandemic through what has been, for you all, extremely difficult and challenging times. I would also like to point out that due to a bout of pneumonia some years ago I had C.O.P.D which had left me with a weakened lung. If this underlying lung condition had not been present then Covid 19 may well not have become the very serious and life threatening condition that it did.

My story starts in mid-October 2020 when I attended an appointment for my annual flu jab at my local GP's surgery. Unfortunately I was turned away without receiving the vaccination as they had run out of the vaccine and only had enough supplies left to vaccinate the person in front of me in the queue. In hindsight I wonder if this was a stroke of bad luck?

About a week later I began to feel tired, shivery and a little run down but as I was not showing any of the then known symptoms of Covid 19. I simply thought I had a mild dose of flu and took painkillers expecting to feel better after a few days. After a few more days I still felt unwell and so on Wednesday 27th October 2020 I went to bed and hoped that I would feel better in a few days' time. My wife Sue later told me that although I was unwell, I seemed to be conscious, able to get out of bed to go to the toilet and was able to eat and drink small amounts. I developed severe headaches so Sue rang the doctor who agreed that my symptoms did not sound like Covid 19 and advised her to speak to the pharmacist and buy some stronger painkillers. The doctor advised that if my symptoms worsened, Sue should ring the NHS helpline 111. I recall none of this.

Exactly one week later, on the night of Wednesday 4th November 2020 (our 31st wedding anniversary), I collapsed as I returned to bed from the bathroom. Sue managed to get me back in to bed then immediately rang 999 and called for an ambulance. She tells me that I complained of severe headache and I was breathing rapidly. Again Sue tells me that the ambulance crew arrived and after putting an oxygen mask on and running several tests I was taken to Bradford Royal Infirmary. Although I was conscious at this time and aware that I had been taken to A&E, I thought that it was still Wednesday 27th October and had no recollection of having been in bed and ill for one whole week.

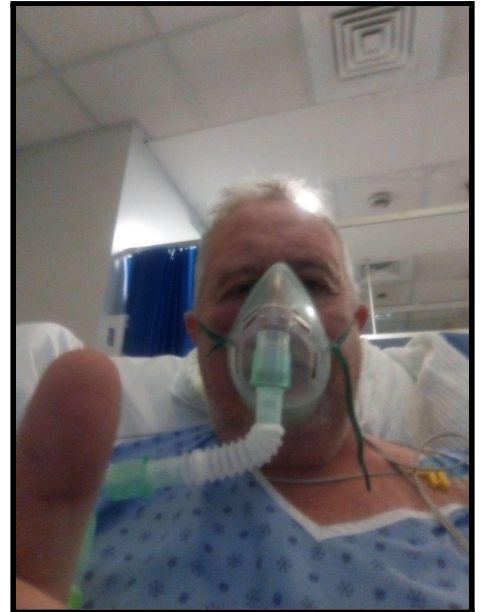
At BRI I tested positive for Covid 19 and was placed in a bed on the Covid ward. Amongst all the tubes, pipes and wires attached to my body I also had to wear a full face oxygen mask all of the time except when eating and drinking. The oxygen mask, along with all the medications I was given appeared to be helping me as I began to feel better and took all the jabs and other treatments in my

stride, even laughing and joking with the nurses, all of whom were absolutely brilliant with their total care and devotion to all the patients in the ward who were at varying stages of Covid infection.

Whilst on the Covid ward I did witness two people sadly lose their battle with the infection and die which was extremely upsetting for me as well as all the staff because I had previously seen these poor souls awake and talking whilst on oxygen, just like me, before their condition deteriorated so that they had to be placed in induced comas and put on ventilators.

During these days I had always felt strong and lucky that I wasn't as seriously ill, as they had been, and felt that I would get through this and soon be well enough to go home. How wrong was !!!

I had been feeling fine and was in good spirits up until 12th November when I began to feel very weak and tired. I was slipping in and out of consciousness and the only thing I can recall at this time is begging the nurse who was attending me to ring Sue and tell her that I loved her so much. I still don't recall this but the doctors must have informed me that my condition had deteriorated so they had no choice but to put me in to an induced coma and put me on a ventilator. I must have figured that if I too was maybe going to die then at least these would be the last words I ever spoke.



I have no memories or recollections of what happened over the next few weeks but later on I did start to have some very weird flashbacks in my mind of being transported elsewhere as well as many other strange things but thought they were just tricks of my subconscious mind right up until I was well enough to understand when I was told what had happened to me.

I think it was around 3rd or 4th December (a month after I had been admitted to BRI) that I first started to regain some sort of consciousness, although it must have only been for a few seconds or moments at a time. It continued like that for a few more days and later, when I had flashbacks to this time, I recall thinking that the clock and date on the wall must be broken or somehow going backwards. I also felt that I was in a new and very strange environment and only knew that I wasn't actually dead because although I didn't know where I was or what was happening to me, I was somehow aware of strange noises and movement around me. Flashbacks and recollections came back to me later of how I was trying to pull a tube out of my throat and was also trying to pull the numerous lines and wires out of my body. I recall nurses having to hold me down and they gave me a severe telling off for this. I also recall trying to fight with someone as I tried to get out of bed and even made an imaginary pistol with my thumb and forefinger, indicating that I was trying to shoot myself or the machines and nurses so that they would then have to move me or wake me up and end my torment. Another time I woke momentarily to find that both my hands were bandaged in tight mittens to prevent me from trying to harm myself. I was later told that at that time I had severe infections around my body and had been feverish and delirious. The tube in my throat was a tracheostomy tube inserted in to my lungs after the ventilator had been removed from my mouth and sedation reduced to gently bring me out of the induced coma.

At this time, although I wasn't in any real pain, I was in a lot of discomfort and couldn't stay awake for long enough to understand anything that I saw or heard. I didn't understand what was happening and drifted in and out of consciousness for a few more days. I must have finally started to come round a bit when I noticed a lot of people gathered around my bed. They were all talking and then the doctor asked me if I knew where I was or what was happening with me. When I shook my head and said no he explained that I was now in Airedale Hospital near Keighley. In BRI I had been put in a coma and on ventilation for a couple of weeks until they removed the ventilation from my mouth and replaced the oxygen supply with a tracheostomy tube in my throat. I had been in BRI for a few weeks before being transferred to Airedale, as Bradford had become overwhelmed with patients needing ventilation. The doctors had felt that because I was stable enough to be moved and that my lungs were coping well enough to change procedures, they had arranged for me to be moved to the Covid ward at Airedale.



This sounded like good news to me until he also explained that because of Covid infection, as well as injury to my lungs, my kidneys were also a great concern and that I was on kidney dialysis and been given blood transfusions as well as being given many antibiotics and other treatments. He told me that I was very poorly indeed.

I remember asking him if I was going to survive. He told me that he would be totally honest with me. He said that although the staff were doing everything they could to support me, and would continue doing so, he could not guarantee that I wouldn't die because I was so poorly. He said it could go either way. I thanked him for his honesty and once he left, I laid back on my pillow and cried and cried. I didn't want to believe that my life may soon end, particularly not in this way.

The next few days were a mixture of emotions ranging from sorrow to denial to acceptance. I began to make peace with myself, safe in the knowledge that at 64 years old I had lived a fulfilled and interesting life and that if this was to be my fate then so be it. I was always very tired but at the same time too frightened to close my eyes and go to sleep in case I didn't wake up again. My exhausted brain went in to overdrive with strange thoughts, dreams and hallucinations appeared in my mind. I felt as though I was on the outside looking in and even witnessed my own death, funeral and wake as well as seeing what appeared to be parts of my life flashing before me. It felt as if my brain was like a computer hard drive and I could summon up and recall, in incredible detail, any event in my life, no matter how small, good, bad or insignificant, right down to conversations that had occurred during my lifetime, even back to my childhood. These strange and often unwelcome thoughts continued for a few days until I finally decided that I had always been stubborn and not one to give up too easily or admit defeat so I told myself NO, I was not going to die and that I would fight this all the way. "Bring it on, I can take it" became my mantra because both Sue and I had worked too hard for too long and

made too many plans for our future. Our future was NOT going to be cruelly snatched away from us. I was determined to live and fulfil those dreams no matter what it takes!

At this time Airedale staff kindly allowed Sue to come and visit me in the Covid ward. At first I refused to believe it was really her as she was fully masked and gowned up in PPE but once I recognised her, it really raised my spirits and made me even more determined to get better.

It's a good job I had this mind set because unfortunately things, for me at least, did get worse. I developed sepsis and became very drowsy and unaware of what was happening around me. I didn't know then that Sue has been called in for a meeting with the Consultant and once again told that I may not survive. Due to my deteriorating condition she had been asked to agree with the doctors to issue a "Do Not Resuscitate" order on me as further damage would most likely be caused if they were to try and resuscitate me in the event of heart failure. Although I would describe much of what was happening to me during these times as a living hell, it must have been far worse for Sue – constantly waiting at home by the phone for daily updates about me, always fearing the worst call of all as well as having to keep family and friends updated.

I'm told that at that time the doctors promised Sue that they would do all they could to save me. They told her they would continue providing me with support and I was therefore sedated, pumped full of antibiotics and rested for a while. Once again I somehow pulled through and 48 hours later Sue was allowed to visit me again.

A few days later after testing negative for Covid I was moved to the High Dependency ward within the Intensive Care Unit. Here the staff were only required to wear masks and visors rather than full has-mat PPE so I could now distinguish the different faces of the nurses and doctors who were still caring for me 24/7. Things became easier to deal with however I began to feel feverish again and my whole body felt as if I was being boiled or cooked alive. Even with the windows open (in December) and a large fan blowing cool air on me, I was still thrashing around and uncomfortable in my bed. I also developed a rash which spread all over my body, thought to have been an adverse reaction to one of the many antibiotics I had been given. I was still full of tubes and lines, including a very painful rectal catheter. I had developed a very sore bed rash on my bottom which meant creams and sprays had to be applied several times a day. I can only describe the pain which felt as if someone was waving a hot blow lamp up and down the inner part of my buttocks. Then just as the fever and rash began to subside my skin began to flake and I developed a chest infection. I had to be washed and smothered in cream twice a day to treat the flaking skin and my back and chest was pummelled and massaged to loosen the phlegm and liquid in my lungs. This was quite painful too but necessary so that it could be suctioned out through the tube in my throat. These procedures were very uncomfortable and there were a few occasions when I honestly wondered if I could take any more. It was only my mantra that kept me going. Also, Sue was able to visit me more frequently over the Christmas period, wearing only a face mask, so I was able to see her more clearly. This was certainly a huge boost.

Because of my infection I was moved away from other patients in to a side room within the high dependency unit. By now I was feeling less drowsy and spent more time awake and aware of things going on around me. At this time I realised that I was almost deaf and also had limited use or feeling in my right arm. I was still very weak as the only food and nutrition I was getting was dripped through a tube in my nose, directly in to my stomach. I was constantly very thirsty and felt dehydrated but

was not allowed to eat or drink anything and couldn't speak due to the tube in my throat. But I still felt as though I'd come through the worst of it.

Having been in a hospital bed for 2 months my muscles were very weak. Daily physiotherapy treatment involved being wrapped in a harness attached to a mobile hoist and being lifted out of bed to be placed in a chair. I had to sit upright for hours at a time and told this was beneficial for my lungs and muscles. It wasn't the easiest of procedures to carry out due to all the tubes, pipes, drips and wires attached to my body but we persevered and gradually things did improve.

Christmas and new year came and went although I can hardly remember much about it as each and every long day and night was more or less the same as each other. The only thing to look forward to was that despite the covid restrictions, Sue was allowed to visit because the staff recognised that it was good for my morale and recovery.



On 4th January 2021 the oxygen supply was finally removed from the tracheostomy tube and oxygen was now being fed through pipes in my nose. A small device was attached to the tracheostomy tube and at last I was able to speak for the first time. A few of the nurses who by now had come to know me well were overjoyed to at last put a voice to my face and character. When Sue visited later that day she got the shock of her life as I spoke to her. I had been hoisted out of bed and was sat out when she came in to the room. When I said "Hello Darling" she was completely taken by surprise but also overjoyed as she hadn't heard me speak or be able to have a conversation with me for over 2 months.

It was only now that I truly believed that I was on the road to recovery and a few days later the tracheostomy tube was finally removed from my throat. At long last I was able to have a drink and quench my raging thirst. I was also allowed to eat pureed food instead of being fed through a tube. Whilst the food wasn't always tasty it was essential as by now I had lost over 3 ½ stones in weight. As I continued to slowly recover I was told that although my lungs were now breathing by themselves,

my kidneys were still injured therefore I was to be sent back to BRI to the Renal ward as soon as they had a bed available.

In the meantime I was moved to another ward where most of the patients were awaiting or recovering from heart procedures. They were all quite agile whilst I was still unable to walk and was completely reliant on the staff for all my needs, which was difficult to come to terms with as I had just been “clapped out” of the ICU ward by many of the staff who had come to know me so well. They had all put so much effort in to caring for me for so long that it felt as though I was leaving many friends behind and was now on my own. This was made worse by the fact that Sue was no longer able to visit me once I had left ICU.

All the staff on the cardiology ward were just as caring and attended to my every need but as Sue couldn't visit I did at times feel a little bit sorry for myself. I also felt a little depressed as I had now had to start using a bed pan but still had a very sore bottom. The ward was extremely busy and the nurses had to work so hard so couldn't give me the one to one care I had received in ICU. The only blessing was that once I was able to speak, Sue had thankfully brought my mobile phone in to the ward so I was now able to call her several times a day. To be able to do this was a big help.

Five days later, on 13th January 2021, a bed had become available in Bradford so I was transferred back to the Renal unit at BRI. Sue was still not allowed to visit me but we could still speak on the phone. I was even more determined to speed up my recovery so that I could go home. At long last I could see the light at the end of what had been a very long tunnel.

As always the staff were fantastic at taking care of me but now the main worry and concern was that although my lungs were still weak, they would eventually heal in time but my kidneys were damaged, possibly diseased and the doctors didn't know if they would heal. I had several blood tests, scans and a kidney biopsy and the Consultants diagnosis was that I probably didn't have kidney disease and that in time my kidneys would heal. That was such a relief to hear.

I underwent intense physiotherapy treatment which involved exercising my legs in bed and with their assistance, getting out of bed and standing. I then began to take a few steps with a walking frame and was even put in a wheelchair and taken to the bathroom so that I could use the toilet, and after many months finally have a much needed and very welcome shower! The dietician allowed me to start eating ordinary food and I truly believed that I was on the mend. At the same time I began to realise and accept how long I'd been in hospital and how ill I had been. I felt extremely lucky.

After a bout a week, although I was not expected to leave hospital for several weeks, I calculated that in a few days time I would have been in hospital for a full 80 days. I imagined what a fitting target it would be to leave on the 80th day so I made it my goal to prove to all the doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and consultants that I was well enough both physically and mentally to go home and continue my recovery.

From being admitted to hospital on Wednesday 4th November to Saturday 23rd January it had been a very long and challenging time but at last I felt as if I now had a chance to return home to Sue so that we could continue our lives together.

I continued with the exercises and pushed myself to walk with the frame to such an extent that I convinced the doctors that I no longer needed to take up a bed in the ward. I told them I live in a

bungalow and my wife would provide me with round the clock care. They eventually agreed and on Saturday 23rd January 2021, 80 days after being admitted, I was discharged and wheeled out of BRI to be collected by a very happy and relieved Sue!

Adapting to life back at home was only possible with the help of my darling Sue. I was still physically very weak and experienced dizzy spells and brain fogging, I continued to surprise myself as well as visiting physiotherapists with the speed and determination I had for recovering. After about 2 weeks I no longer needed the walking frame and was able to walk a few steps with the help of a walking stick. I was overjoyed when I was finally able to stand alone in the shower. I was just happy to be home and able to do a few things for myself. Sue continued to care for me but fortunately I became less dependent on her day by day.

It is now 6 months since I was discharged and I am receiving fantastic after care from the NHS. I still attend appointments with the kidney specialist and see the lung specialist in the long covid clinic at St Luke's hospital. I have had many tests, scans, blood tests and follow up calls from health professionals who continue to provide support. I'm also taking my medication but thanks to the fantastic support I have received from everyone, my life is beginning to return to something like normal although I do still get quite breathless at times. My lung and kidney functions as well as my hearing and nerve damaged areas have all improved too.

I have always considered myself to be an active person so learning to cope with and accept some of the physical and even mental limitations is not always easy. I occasionally have a little bit of low mood and sometimes get frustrated which makes me angry or bad tempered but thankfully these occasions are few and far between. I still have symptoms of long covid and experience many different feelings and emotions but I am on the whole very happy and glad to be alive.

I am sincerely grateful to each and every person who has been involved in all of my care and treatment whether directly or indirectly, front line or background support, both past, present and future because without you all the outcome of this story could have been very different. The unwavering devotion of care and treatment from you all throughout my "journey" has been far exceeded the expected call of duty and I am, and will always be forever in your debt for all the blood, sweat, tears and care you give to all of your patients, not just myself.

THANK YOU ALL NHS STAFF