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Professor Neena Modi, BMA president's speech at the BMA's memorial service for doctors who lost their lives to Covid-19

BMA House, London

Guests, friends and colleagues, members of Council, I am so very pleased we can be together today, in person, and not through the impersonal route of an on-line call.

My name is Neena Modi, and I have the honour and privilege of speaking today as BMA president. I am a neonatologist, and a clinical academic, working in London. I have family, friends and colleagues around the world. In March 2020, I was lecturing in South-East Asia, my husband was helping deliver cancer care to children in Myanmar, my daughter was working in the Netherlands, and my son was a front-line junior doctor in the NHS. We were a family scattered around the world, like so many NHS families. I got home on the last BA flight from Bangkok before the airline shut down, and my husband, 48 hours later. I did not see my daughter for 20 months. But my story is nothing compared to what so many of you here today have suffered.

This is why I am pleased we can gather in person today. I offer you my profound sorrow and heartfelt condolences. I, with the staff and members of the BMA want to reflect together, with you, on the loss of family, friends, and colleagues, mourn their loss and recognise the enormous contributions and sacrifices they and others made during the Covid-19 pandemic. I can share but never fully know the pain of those of you who have lost loved ones, but I can tell you that the entire medical community is proud of them, and wants you to know this. We want to honour them, and keep their memory alive, which is why a new memorial, the Richard Tannenbaum sculpture, is now in place at BMA House.

Going back to March 2020, no one knew what was about to befall the world. It is almost two years to the day that the BMA closed its doors and sent staff home, they thought possibly for 4-6 weeks. Instead, staff, like much of the rest of the country, would work from home for two years. But not everyone was able to stay at home. Around the country, front-line workers, in hospitals, transport, and other suppliers of essential services pulled together and supported the country. Knowledge of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was scant, the situation was unprecedented, the country and indeed the world was unprepared, and the upshot was that many – too many – paid the ultimate price. The latest estimates are that globally [18 million people lost their lives to Covid](#). One hundred years ago, 50 million people died from the Spanish flu. Today we have intensive care, and the ability to make vaccines, and make them quickly. Yet, we could not provide PPE, nor reach agreement on the best course of action. It was the courage and selflessness of front-line workers that carried the day.

Last year I was also privileged to be a member of the panel of the People's Covid Inquiry. This was launched by the charity Keep Our NHS Public when calls from around the country for a public inquiry – including from the BMA – went unheard. On the panel I listened to and read the personal testaments of people from all walks of life. There were amazing examples of courage and duty, and agonising stories of losing loved ones, stories of people who should not have died, who could have been saved, but who died, and harrowing accounts of not being able to be with a loved one at the end.

So, I can understand if many of you are angry. But today, is first and foremost about celebration of the lives of colleagues, friends, and family. In due course, there must be honest consideration of

what happened, what went wrong, and above all recognition that the NHS must not be run so ragged, so close to the bone. There are over 6 million people on waiting lists now, and NHS staff continue to bear the brunt of a service that has been run down, and the pain of not being able to provide the care they were trained to provide, and want to provide. So, I am very glad that just a few days ago we heard that the public Covid inquiry will include within its remit, consideration of the preparedness of UK health services, their capacity, and the adequacy of their workforce. Who will care for the carers? The BMA will continue to fight for their wellbeing, because they deserve to be cared for, and because so many depend on them.

The public respects doctors and nurses above all other professions, but all too often the public feels helpless in not knowing what they can do to ensure that everyone can get the care they need, nor too what they can do to tackle the terrible societal inequities that the pandemic laid bare and widened. This is also why the BMA wants not only to support doctors who selflessly place their patients above their own wellbeing and that of their families, but to advocate ceaselessly to improve the root causes of injustice and inequity in our society.

If Covid were not tragedy enough, the terrible war in Ukraine shows that even the unthinkable can and does occur. Once again, healthcare staff are battling against the odds, the most vulnerable and innocent are dying, and the world fears an escalation. This historic building, BMA House, is a reflection of the human condition, with memorials to those who fell in the two world wars. Outside there is a plaque in memory of those who died in the terrorist bombs of July 2015. Doctors will always be needed, sadly the world is rid neither of war, nor terrorism, nor plagues. So let's celebrate together the lives of the doctors, the loved ones, the friends, the colleagues we have lost and pledge that we continue to strive for a better future for all of human kind.