

**16<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

**Dr Chaand Nagpaul, BMA council chair's opening address to guests at the BMA's memorial service for doctors who lost their lives to Covid-19**

**BMA House, London**

Today's ceremony marks a solemn occasion. It is an opportunity to reflect on the sacrifice made by doctors throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, to recognise and mourn the loss of colleagues, of friends and of family.

It was over two years ago now that the first reports of a new and highly contagious infectious disease began to emerge from Wuhan. In the few months that followed that virus accelerated and we saw nations around the globe succumb to national emergency.

A policy of containment could only slow what seemed like the inevitable spread of the virus to all shores, all nations, all peoples of the world.

We remember the scenes in Italy as the virus first took hold in Europe. It was clear at that point, as we watched and waited, that we would soon be in a similar position and dealing with a virus of unknown consequences while under significant professional strain.

Within weeks life had changed dramatically for everyone. In March people in all four nations of the UK were ordered to stay home to protect themselves and the most vulnerable in society.

In April non-urgent care was suspended, the NHS was truly in the midst of a crisis unlike anything we had ever experienced before. Vast and cavernous Nightingale hospitals were a harrowing reminder that the fight against Covid had become likened to war.

It is important to reflect on those first few weeks to understand depths of courage and bravery that our colleagues displayed. There was no guarantee of personal safety, amidst shortages of protective equipment, with no vaccination or effective therapeutics. For thousands of doctors, nurses, healthcare professionals and support staff there was only the frontline.

Through every resurging wave of this pandemic, a constant has been the heroism and selflessness of the medical workforce. As many millions of people sheltered in their homes to limit contact with others we went to work to care for the sick and the vulnerable. As the virus shut down society, we served the nation. When people were asked to lockdown, they did their duty, and we did ours.

It is a cruel tragedy that in saving the lives of tens of thousands of patients, so many doctors lost their own. They dedicated their lives to the pursuit of helping others. Their deeds will inspire generations long after this pandemic has passed.

The pandemic also widened the fault lines of health inequalities that pervade our society.

Eighty-four per cent of doctors who have died were from an ethnic minority background. Many of those had come from all over the world to serve in our health service and save the lives of others, only to sadly lose their own. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their selfless dedication and contribution. So many of them built a career here despite facing many trials and tribulations. They continued to work throughout this crisis, some separated from their families who were also at risk in other parts of the world.

Indeed, the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the immeasurable and vital contribution of our multicultural workforce to our nation. Rest assured that the NHS will forever proudly be defined by its diverse staff and the contributions of all of our colleagues.

To the families and friends of those who died and are here with us today, we offer our profound sorrow and heartfelt condolences. We are one profession, one medical family, and we grieve for all those we have lost. We take pride in having stood alongside them as colleagues and pay tribute to the immense good they brought to the world.

While all these deaths have been such a huge loss to so many, we have heard the inspiring and heart-warming accounts of their lives as doctors, friends and family members. We've heard about their hobbies and talents beyond the world of medicine, about their lives as painters, or hill climbers, writers, or musicians. Today we mourn their loss as we celebrate their lives, their passions, and their stories. Each one a unique reminder of the reason so many of us became doctors; the shared respect we have for the sanctity of life. Our memorial today is dedicated to all of them who lived to make the lives of others better.

Many of you attending today will have walked through our Courtyard, where we can see a number of memorials which embody our shared grief and respect in something material and permanent. Our central gates bearing our association's badge and the gilded serpent of Asclepius remember the medical officers killed in the First Great War. Our bronze fountain, surrounded by the four statues of sacrifice, cure, prevention and aspiration, and made from Portland stone, memorialise the men and women who gave their lives in the Second World War.

There is a common sentiment between these memorials and the one that we present today. It was perhaps best described at the unveiling of the second of these great and dedicated works by the then Archbishop of Canterbury. He remarked that those medics had saved others in a glorious triumph of their calling and of their healing art, but themselves they could not save.

In closing, I would like to introduce our talented artist Richard Tannenbaum whose sculpture will remain an enduring testament to the ceaseless efforts of the NHS and that will stand in memory of the bravery and sacrifice of those who gave their lives.