Eshan's story 22nd June 2020

About me	Household	Spouse	Children	Community and area
I am male and I was born in London, but I grew up in India. I did my medical school and general surgery training in India, and then I came to the UK in 1999. I'm a Consultant and Service Lead at [Teaching Hospital in the Midlands].	We have three members in the family, myself, my wife and a son who is 18. We are Indian. We are Hindus, but rarely go to places of worship. None of us have any underlying medical illnesses.	My wife was also born in India. My wife is a GP. We have been married now for 26 years.	My son is at university in his first year, living in university dorms.	I live in [affluent suburb], which is in the middle of [City]. Everything is in walking distance, in terms of pubs, groceries, gyms and it's very close to the hospital where I work. There's no such thing as community, because all the houses are quite wide apart. Even the Thursday "clapping" we hardly heard.

My life before COVID

Pre-COVID I'd taken a sabbatical for six weeks and I'd just returned. I was climbing in the Andes mountains and there was absolutely no contact with the outside world. I had no idea until we came down from the mountain that there was this COVID thing which was breaking out. It was only when I was about to depart, I started seeing signs at the airport that there's a COVID outbreak in the eastern hemisphere. I started thinking of the case of SARS and those epidemics, and I thought it might be the same thing.

The guidelines for isolation and shielding were all being developed during that week. Being in healthcare, we had the advantage of information coming to our department on a daily basis. I'm a [Specialist] plus the Head of Department, so we very quickly went through our criteria of which patients should come in, which should not and how to reform our clinics. We went to telephone based virtual clinics. I had to digest all that information and then circulate it to the rest of the team as well. On the 23rd of March, we opened our COVID positive ward and that's where we started seeing our mixed specialty patients. I had to go through all the training from when I was in med school.

My wife's GP surgery changed much later. The NHS didn't provide GPs with enough PPE and they had to go and source it out themselves. One of the things they did very well was converting all the clinics into telephone and virtual clinics.

At home, we were really busy sorting out our work-related stuff - we didn't even go and queue up for getting toilet rolls like some of our friends! My son then started ringing me saying that their lectures were stopping so I had to pick him up from [University City] the day before the lockdown. I picked up one of his roommates as well who also lives locally and told them 'this is it - you guys will not be meeting'.

My experience of COVID

"Suddenly the mountain was easier than having gone through COVID. I'm an adrenaline junkie, so I don't just get scared normally, like others, but this time I was genuinely scared. I told my wife how much I loved her and my son and all that stuff. I did my last rites in case I don't wake up and this might be my end."

Within two or three weeks of returning from the sabbatical, COVID hit me bad. It's highly likely that it was from the ward. I went for a run one evening and I felt really achy and tired. I was physically extremely fit – I was on the peak of a seven thousand metre mountain in South America, which requires considerable endurance and training. I thought, why am I so tired? My taste had gone and I had a temperature, but it was so light that I still went into work in the morning. They said 'you've got a fever - you need to go and isolate'. So I just stuck myself to one room. My son wasn't allowed in the room, only my wife came in with food and things.

For the first four days it was like malaria - swinging temperatures and sweats, my breathing was fine. Then I started feeling really unwell and my body was hurting so much that I couldn't move. I felt as if someone was standing on my chest. I was taking lots of paracetamol and vitamin supplements. I was on the phone for almost thirty minutes before I could get through. NHS 111 advised me something which really didn't help. I really feel for people without any medical knowledge who have gone through all these things and lost their loved ones and all that, for very, very basic information, which 111 was providing.

Then one evening I just passed out and the paramedics came. Having been to the Intensive Care Unit myself, I was very worried about going into hospital. I know hospitals are fully laden with secondary bacterial infections. The ICU had a bed reserved for me, but I decided not to go in - I had a lot of confidence about my lungs. I feel that was the right decision because I had all the kit at home with me.

The following morning the hospital sent lots of stuff home. Someone came in PPE and did all my blood tests and ECGs at home. Everything came back very high and my chest was still not right. Some papers had come out about combination usage of doxycycline and amoxicillin, so they sent me both and I started taking the antibiotics. 48 hours later (on day 12) my fever came down. By then I was completely exhausted and had lost six kilos in weight. A pretty miserable experience really.

My life after COVID
Although I'm 51, prior to COVID, my chronological age was 43 and as of yesterday my chronological age is 49. So I'm still better than the vast majority but my chest is not right and I still have residual weakness. I saw a respiratory physician about three weeks ago who advised me to have a CT scan and lung function tests. I really need to get on top of my lungs, because I am planning to climb one of the mountains in the Himalayas – Everest, which is an eight thousand metre peak.

Even staying in the same household, my wife had no symptoms. My son was slightly unwell two or three weeks after I had it, but it didn't last for long. When I was going through the COVID crisis my wife had to isolate for two weeks, but she managed to work from home.

Why my COVID experience matters
If you look at my department there are only three white guys. Everyone else is BME background and we are all frontline staff. You just look at the healthcare in general, the NHS healthcare, there's a considerable amount of BME staff in there. The vast majority of people I know who had severe COVID illness were all BME. So myself, a max-fax surgeon, another gynaecologist and a couple of Filipino nurses.

There has absolutely been no form of monetary compensation or even an acknowledgement, other than the public clapping on Thursday, for working on the frontline. When all the banking crisis happened, they still got their millions and their pensions. No one died there. Here our healthcare people have died - lots of BME people have died and nothing has been done about that. Organisations like Sainsbury or M&S have recognised frontline work, but what has the government done about it? Absolutely zilch. Nothing.

There are next to none BME people who are on our upper management board. How come we are only doing frontline stuff and we are not getting into any of the policy decision making and things, both at a local level as well as at a national level? As far as I am concerned, as an individual, I've never had any racism in the NHS or even otherwise. I've been blessed with that.