

Eye-to-Eye: February 2021 Report: To COVID & Beyond

This month's Eye-to-Eye focussed on the 'call to action' that many people around the UK answered to help & protect our nation amidst a global pandemic. This session was well attended, with 40 people listening to our speakers for the evening:

- 1) Dispensing Optician John Hardman – who, having started a new position only 8 days prior, was redeployed by his employer to one of the mass COVID Test Centres in the north west of England. John used skills gained in his 'day job' to head up a sizeable team & manage the logistics from day one.
- 2) Liveryman Professor Tara Moore, more used to research into gene editing related to eye disease, again was called upon to use the skills of her 'day job' by diversifying her research into testing systems for COVID, collecting data & making recommendations to scientific consortia and government.



Whilst these two individuals might on the surface seem to have little in common, it was clear to see that there were many parallels and a theme developing as the event progressed.

John shared with us how he was literally 'thrown in at the deep end' – taken to a site full of portacabins, with staff who had never worked together before, whom he had to train, accredit & then deliver services. Initially a small team, they were soon overwhelmed with the demands for testing until help arrived in the shape of the Army! John was thankful but faced with further problems, not least the British weather & as accustomed as the Army personnel were at responding to direction – it was another matter for them to receive orders from a civilian! As the army and experienced optical staff returned to their day jobs and recruitment for roles on the team was outsourced outside his control, John's managerial skills came under even more pressure. However, with a lot of teamwork, organisation, patience and persistence, by the end of April the team had achieved a record number of tests in one day.

Tara went on to explain what changes she had experienced in her role – initially she was to test & collect data on the efficacy & accuracy of swab tests already in use by the medical profession, test centres & home use for testing of individuals who are shielding or isolating. Tara was then tasked with a similar data analysis of another “rapid test” (AbC19 test) - a pin prick blood test, like blood glucose testing.

Tara, like John faced many challenges – the need for rapid changes in approach, the practical organisation of participants in their cars in a university car park beset by terrible weather conditions and then the careful statistical analysis needed to identify false positives & false negatives. The added complication in screening & detecting COVID is the fact that approximately 50% of people with COVID are asymptomatic – completely unaware of any of the symptoms we have been told to look out for. For everyone else this is a huge concern as they may be unwittingly spreading & transmitting the virus to others.

Outcomes from Tara’s work showed that antigen testing is effective in detecting an infectious case of SARS–Cov-2, asymptomatic testing was welcomed by those in the trial and ongoing within the University of Ulster testing has been offered to staff, students and road transport users (logistics, hauliers) to enable entry to Europe from the University. There will be ongoing assessment of data from both testing modalities.

The evening was rounded off by a Q & A session before The Master closed the evening by thanking both John & Tara for taking time from their extremely busy schedules to spend time with us. Not just the Company, but the whole of the UK should be grateful for the work that they had been doing & continue to do.

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