

# Freepress



**Protect yourself and others**  
**Get the free staff flu jab**

Follow our Twitter account @RoyalFreeNHS to see what our patients and staff are saying about us



# Hello and welcome

to the October edition of our monthly staff, members and governors' magazine.

Winter is nearly upon us, and in this month's magazine you can read about some of the things we're doing to prepare ourselves and our hospitals. This includes making more space for our patients, with the opening of the brand new Rainbow ward at Barnet Hospital (page 5). We're also building up our team, and this issue of Freepress celebrates some of our newest staff – like the overseas nurses who joined us during the pandemic (page 10) – as well as one of the longest serving members of the trust (page 4).

The start of winter also means flu season. Free vaccinations are available to all of our staff, and they're essential for protecting yourselves, your colleagues and your patients. I've had my jab, and I'd encourage all of you to go onto Freenet and use the Swiftqueue link to book yours. Read more about how it all works on pages 6 and 7.

As always, this month's Freepress also shares some of the many exciting projects taking place around our hospitals. From a new study exploring the effects of salt on the immune system (page 9), to the infection control champions protecting our wards (page 10), I'm always thrilled to see the incredible innovations led by our staff. You all go to incredible lengths to ensure that we are giving patients the best care that we can.

Thank you for continuing to make the Royal Free London such a fantastic place to work. Take care of yourselves, and look after each other.



**Caroline Clarke**  
Group chief executive

positively welcoming  
actively respectful  
clearly communicating  
visibly reassuring

Key to abbreviations:  
Barnet Hospital: BH  
Chase Farm Hospital: CFH  
Royal Free Hospital: RFH  
Royal Free London: RFL



# Take the NHS staff survey 2020

The 2020 NHS staff survey gives every member of the RFL team a chance to have their say.

The NHS has never before experienced a year like this one. The COVID-19 pandemic has demanded the very best from all of us. Thank you for everything you have done to support NHS patients and colleagues during this time. Now we need to know what it has been like for you.

It only takes 15 minutes to complete your survey, and you will be entered into a prize draw with the chance to win a £100 voucher every week.

Here are five key reasons to complete your staff survey this year:

- If you don't tell us what would make working here better, we won't know
- We ask everyone what they think – while some trusts only ask a small percentage of their staff to respond, we ask everyone who is directly employed by the trust. That's 10,000 of you
- It's quick, easy and confidential – just click on the link sent to your trust email address. Search 'Quality Health' in your inbox
- You can complete the survey during your working time. Your line manager will give you the time you need to fill in the survey
- We'll share the results with you – you'll be able to see what matters to staff and how we plan to address it.



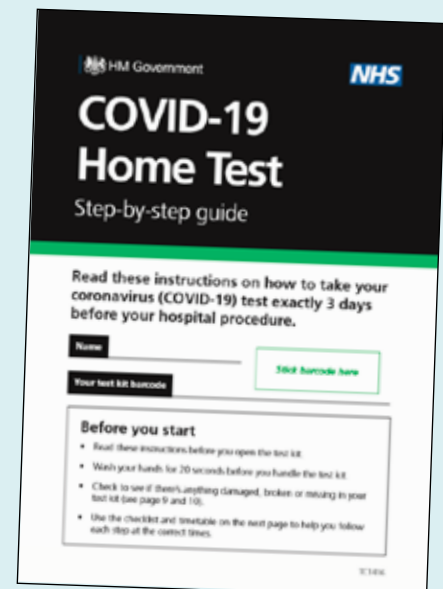
## Home swabbing to help provide safer surgery

Patients at Chase Farm Hospital have been given the option to carry out a COVID-19 swab test themselves at home before coming for surgery – speeding up the process and helping the hospital to maintain its testing capacity for emergencies and in-patients.

This is part of a larger project that will see self-swabbing for elective surgery patients rolled out across the RFL. We are currently putting the infrastructure in place to allow all of our hospitals to offer self-swabbing, with ophthalmology at the RFH expected to be the next service to come on board. Our pilot has allowed 15 patients to be offered a self-swab test each day. By the end of November we expect this to increase to more than 100.

Martin Young, clinical director of pathology, said: "Offering home swabbing is going to make preparing for a hospital visit so much easier for our patients. We ask patients to self-isolate before coming for surgery, so sending the swabbing kits directly to their homes means that they can avoid an extra trip to the hospital. This is particularly important for our more vulnerable patients, who may have already been shielding.

"It's great to see that the pathway is working well so far: the first set of patients to be offered self-swabbing at CFH have now had their operations, and all were able to get their test results back in time for surgery."



# Half century – not out!

**Pharmacy technician Balu (Balwant) Chauhan is celebrating 50 years of working for the NHS – with a total of four decades spent at the RFH.**

When the 71-year-old from Edgware started out on 21 September 1970 he was 21 and took home £8 a week as a student pharmacy technician. In May 1979 he joined the RFH and has been here ever since, becoming chief pharmacy technician.

Although he officially had to retire in 2009 in order to start claiming his pension, that hasn't stopped Balu. After an obligatory few weeks at home he was granted leave to 'retire and return' as a pharmacy technician. He now works three days a week and among other jobs his role includes helping to repurpose drugs that haven't been used by patients on the wards.

Balu said: "I enjoyed the first month of my retirement but by the second I was itching to get back to work. I don't have a hobby that I find more interesting than my job."

From getting involved in the Hampstead millennium carnival back in 1986, fundraising for various causes and organising his beloved cricket matches between pharmacy and different services including plastics and vascular, Balu says it's the staff and the patients who keep him coming to work.

He said: "I enjoy gardening but retirement isn't for me, certainly not for a while. Pharmacy is a wonderful department to work in – it's incredibly friendly and sociable. I also like being able to use my skills to benefit patients – it feels a bit of a waste to not use that."

Because of his age, Balu recently had a break from work so he could shield from COVID-19 – but he is now back at work. He said: "I had to stay at home but I don't mind admitting I found it incredibly boring. I was longing to get back to work!"



Since Balu joined, the pharmacy team has tripled in size. In 1986 Balu was instrumental in turning the hospital pharmacy into a business that could manufacture and sell drugs to other trusts, companies and chemists across the UK. In the first year they were targeted with achieving a turnover of £10,000 but they made £37,000. Now turnover from supplying external organisations is in excess of £2.5 million, money which is reinvested into the NHS.

Wendy Spicer, chief pharmacist at the Royal Free Hospital, said: "Balu is a perfect example of our trust values. He's hard working, helpful, kind, respectful and always there for his patients and his colleagues. He's truly inspirational, everyone knows him across the trust and we're extremely lucky to have kept him for so long. He epitomises the very best of the NHS."



*Balu in 1982*

# Over the rainbow



*Staff prepared the ward to receive its first patients.*

## **Rainbow ward, Barnet Hospital's brand new modular unit, has opened its doors to patients.**

The ward provides 35 new beds, creating extra capacity to help treat patients through the winter months.

Barnet Hospital's new director of nursing, Bev Thomas, was there to oversee the opening. She said: "What a fantastic way to start my new role. I was privileged to see the first patient arrive. We have a multidisciplinary team here, working very hard to ensure that this additional capacity brings with it a very positive experience for our patients.

"The staff were all very welcoming and excited to be part of this amazing new facility, which promotes social distancing in the clinical area.

"Congratulations and well done to the entire Barnet Hospital team."

Rainbow ward has 15 side rooms to help ensure that staff can follow the infection control requirements needed to safely manage patients – particularly important given the challenges posed by COVID-19. Long-term it will be used for patients receiving medical in-patient care.

Construction started in April, while the hospital was tackling the first wave of the pandemic, and has been completed over just a few short months. Teams from across the hospital have worked with external contractors to make this possible.

Group chief nurse Julie Hamilton was involved with the project from the start. She said: "We're very proud of what our clinical, operational and estates teams have done over a short period of time to bring much needed additional bed capacity to Barnet Hospital. This will help to ensure that patients are brought to the right place at the right time, improving their experience. It will also be essential in coping with winter pressures."

# Protect yourself to help others

Winter has arrived and flu season is upon us. Book your free staff flu jab today and protect yourself to help others.

This year we're making the flu vaccination even more accessible for all of our staff. You can book an appointment through the Swiftqueue online booking system: have the vaccine when it's most convenient for you.

RFL staff can get the full details for how to book from Freenet now.

Appointments are available at BH, CFH and RFH and peer vaccinators are going out to our satellite sites.



## Why is the flu vaccine important?

By getting the flu vaccine, you're not just protecting yourself. You're also helping to protect your family, your colleagues and our patients. Getting the flu jab is the most effective way to protect yourself against the flu.

Group chief nurse Julie Hamilton is leading the trust's 2020 flu vaccination programme, and this year we have seconded project lead Suzy Wheeler and a team of full time vaccinators to drive the campaign.

Julie said: "We've all felt the impact of COVID-19 on the NHS, the community and our family and friends. This coming winter we will be faced with the combined risk of coronavirus and flu. Please protect yourself and others and book your free flu jab using Swiftqueue - it's simple and easy to do.

"The flu jab is the best protection we have against the flu. It helps to keep us protected and healthy, so that we can continue to look after patients during one of the busiest times of the year. So please protect yourself to help others."

She added: "This year's vaccine protects you from two strains of the A influenza virus and two strains of the B influenza and is more similar to the actual predicted flu viruses this season."



## Flu FAQs

### What are the possible effects of flu?

For most people flu causes an unpleasant illness but they will recover within two weeks. But some people may develop potentially serious complications, such as ear and sinus infections, pneumonia, inflammation of the heart (myocarditis) or meningitis.

### Can the flu jab make me ill?

The vaccination cannot give you flu because it does not contain live viruses. You may get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards. This is caused by your immune system responding to the vaccine, it is not flu.

### I had the flu vaccine last year. Why do I need to have it again?

The viruses that cause flu change every year. The flu vaccine is adapted annually to offer the best protection for the upcoming flu season.

### Does the vaccine contain eggs or animal products?

It's egg-free which means if you have an egg allergy you can now have the jab and there are also no animal products in this flu vaccine.

### Get your reusable water bottle

There's another good reason to get the flu jab. This year we're giving every member of staff who has the flu jab a free reusable water bottle. We care about your health and wellbeing and the bottle will help in ensuring we all keep hydrated. You can pick up your bottle when you get your jab and there is a space on the bottle to add your name in permanent pen.

**A huge thank you to the Royal Free Charity for funding the water bottles and supporting our campaign again this year.**

**Once you've had your flu jab, let us know! Post a picture on social media so we can share it and spread the word. Use the hashtag #RFLflufighter**

*Staff rolled up their sleeves for the first day of the campaign.*



# “I had a liver transplant during the pandemic – I’m a lucky guy”

**While the attention of the world has been focused on coronavirus, for one man receiving a life-saving liver transplant was his health priority.**

Kevin Higgs, 52, a father-of-two from Croxley Green in Hertfordshire, says he is still counting his blessings after undergoing a successful liver transplant at the RFH.

But now the immunosuppressant drugs Kevin has to take so his body doesn't reject the new liver mean he's more vulnerable to infection, including COVID-19, so he's still shielding at home.

Kevin admits when he was diagnosed a year ago with liver problems it came as a complete shock. Kevin had played football into his 30s. He describes himself as a social drinker and certainly didn't see himself as a candidate for cirrhosis of the liver.



*Kevin Higgs (left) with his family*

He said: “I never thought of myself as dependent on alcohol. I liked a couple of beers after work and wine with dinner as much as the next person but as soon as I was told by doctors there was a problem last year I hoped that abstaining completely from alcohol would enable the liver to repair itself.

“My wife, Elaine, was diagnosed with cancer and although she's now had the all clear it was quite a stressful time and I probably did drink a bit more than usual in 2018.”

At the beginning of this year Kevin and Elaine decided to treat themselves to the holiday of a lifetime in South Africa. But during the holiday Kevin's energy levels dipped and he felt unwell.

He said: “I could feel something wasn't right while I was away and when I came back I went straight into Watford General Hospital – I wasn't tanned – I was jaundiced and looking very yellow.”

The second time Kevin was admitted to hospital, new visitor restrictions due to COVID-19 meant he wasn't able to see friends or family in person during this stay.

After a couple of weeks in the RFH he was discharged home. But not long after Kevin got the call that a donor liver was available. As his transplant took place his daughter Sophie turned 21. During the procedure he was allowed to hold the locket his daughter had given him which had the inscription ‘I'll always be your little girl and you'll always be my hero!’

Kevin said: “It was my lucky charm, we're a very close family and it meant everything to me to have that with me.”

“I'm extremely grateful to the person who donated their liver and their family. Without that person I wouldn't be sitting here and I hope that gives them some comfort and I want them to know it's not being wasted.”

Dr Aileen Marshall, consultant hepatologist at the RFH, said: “The COVID pandemic had a significant impact on liver transplant services across the country, especially during March and April, when the number of donor livers fell to less than 20 per cent of normal. The whole transplant team is delighted that Kevin has recovered so well. More than ever, we are grateful to donors and their families for taking the time to consider organ donation. Without them, transplantation would not be possible.”



# Could regulating salt intake be the key to better health?



*Pictured L-R:  
Dr Rhys Evans,  
Professor Alan Salama  
and Dr Stephen Walsh*

**A new study by doctors at the Royal Free London reveals that salt plays an important role in the immune system.**

The study, led by renal consultants Professor Alan Salama and Dr Stephen Walsh, revealed that patients who have a condition which means they lose excessive salt in the urine, often suffer from recurrent infections because they do not make enough of a protective type of white blood cell that is needed as part of a healthy immune system.

Dr Rhys Evans, a senior renal trainee who worked on the study, said that while evidence from other research had shown that high salt diets could promote a more extreme immune response and worsen autoimmune conditions such as multiple sclerosis, there hadn't been any corresponding work to find out the impact on the immune system of a lack of salt.

The team behind the study initially put themselves and a group of volunteers, including transplant patients, on a low salt diet for a week. However, over this short period of time, there was no effect on their immune system.

Instead, they looked at a group of their patients who have conditions, including those with Gitelman or Bartter syndrome, which means they lose significant quantities of salt through their kidneys.

Professor Salama said: "The patients were not just experiencing infections – they were recurrent. Everything from chronic fungal infections to unusual abscesses and high rates of urinary infections, particularly in men. Through a series of experiments Rhys discovered that these patients don't make enough of a white blood cell protective protein – interleukin 17 – which plays an important role in the immune system.

"The implication from our study is that too little salt over a long period of time reduces your immune system's ability to protect you from infection. Going forward we can find out if there are ways we can try to improve immune responsiveness for these patients to enable them to successfully fight infection."

Dr Stephen Walsh, who also led on the study, added: "The results of this study are important, not only because they tell us more than we knew about these rare conditions, but because they show that salt plays an important part in the effective operation of the immune system. However, more research is needed before we can say if salt can be used to affect outcomes in autoimmune disease."

The study was published in Nature Communications and brought together RFL experts in renal immunology and renal physiology.

# Celebrating our new infection control champions

Thank you to all of our new infection control champions. They will ensure that the latest infection control information and guidelines are shared and put into practice across our hospitals.

Lovely Roy, clinical nurse specialist for infection prevention and control and part of the team leading the programme, said: "This is a really important programme that will ensure staff on our wards always have up to date information about infection control. We know that there are a lot of important measures we can take to help prevent any infection and avoid the transmission of any infectious diseases – and the events of the past year have really highlighted how important the work of our infection control champions is.

"They will become role models on the wards, and act as the first point of contact when other members of the team have questions or need some extra support."



*IPC champions collect their certificates*

## Success for overseas nurses at the heart of our COVID-19 response

Congratulations to our new overseas nurses. These nurses have been an important part of our response to COVID-19, and are now able to celebrate their success in having passed the rigorous exams required to take their careers forwards.

Jansen De Leon, lead nurse for post registration nursing education, said: "This is a fantastic success for our overseas nurses, and great news for the ICU where they have been based. They arrived here at the start of the pandemic and became a vital part of our response to COVID-19.

"We have been supporting overseas nurses through this process since 2017, ensuring that there is plenty of training and support available. Last year all 163 of our new overseas nurses were able to pass their NMC OSCE exam. This year, 75 more successful nurses can already add their names to that list."

One of the overseas nurses to arrive at the Royal Free Hospital was Kate Titheridge. Kate said: "I arrived at the end of March, had a week of induction and then jumped straight into working at the ICU.

"The support we had from other members of the team was fantastic – people were so welcoming and patient, taking time out of their busy shifts to explain everything properly. Working through such an intense time gave me the opportunity to gain knowledge and experiences that I probably wouldn't have had during a normal period.

"Once things began to settle down and the OSCE test centres reopened we shifted our focus to preparing for the exams. This could also be quite intense, but again the support was excellent. Now that I've passed my exam there are a few more assessments that will take place over the coming month to complete my supernumerary period, and then I'll be able to work independently in ICU."



# RFL joins world-leading partnership

The RFL will play a key role in a world-leading partnership that is aiming to accelerate the development of vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. We have committed to the Human Challenge Programme, part of the Government's vaccines taskforce.

The first stage of this project will explore the feasibility of exposing healthy volunteers to the coronavirus. In this initial phase, the aim will be to discover the smallest amount of virus it takes to cause a person to become infected. This will take place at the Royal Free Hospital and is known as a virus characterisation study.

Subject to ethics approval, the first study would start in early 2021 and focus on identifying the lowest levels of the virus needed to infect healthy consenting adult volunteers. The RFH will provide a range of services to support the running of the study. These include space rental, maintenance, utilities, cleaning, catering, portering and security.

Caroline Clarke, Royal Free London group chief executive, said: "We are proud to be part of this hugely important partnership, which we hope will advance the world's



ITV News interview Sir Michael Jacobs on the launch day

understanding of COVID-19 as we look to rapidly develop life-saving vaccines and treatments.

"The Royal Free Hospital has a great history and tradition of treating and researching infectious diseases and our infectious diseases centre is renowned across the world for its work in this specialist area. We are looking forward to working alongside Imperial College London, the Department of Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, and hVIVO on such a vital piece of work over the coming months."

Sir Michael Jacobs, director of infection at the Royal Free London, was interviewed on the BBC News Channel, Radio 5 Live Drive, the Jeremy Vine programme on BBC Radio 2 and ITV News to explain what the study will aim to achieve.

## 'Rising Star' shines bright

Congratulations to nutrition clinical nurse specialist Dorcas Boamah, who has been named a Rising Star award winner.

The Rising Star Awards are part of the Royal College of Nursing's Black History Month celebrations, recognising excellence within London's BAME community.

Dorcas said: "Finding out that I had won this award was a complete shock, but a lovely one – working through the pandemic was such a challenge, so it means a lot to be recognised for my hard work.

"I volunteered at the Nightingale Hospital and had the experience of working in ICU for the first time. There were days when I felt great anxiety but when you are nurse you show up and do your job – not because it is work, but because every nurse has a passion for compassionate care."

Dorcas was nominated by Natalie Forrest, chief executive of Chase Farm Hospital. Natalie said:

The trust has been celebrating Black History Month with a series of virtual talks as well as networking opportunities and listening events for staff.



# 60 seconds with...

**Matt Hall is head of health and safety for the Royal Free London. During COVID-19, he has played a key role in keeping staff protected, focussing on vital PPE as well as important everyday infection control.**



## **What was your focus during the first wave of the pandemic?**

One big area of focus was mask fit testing – making sure that PPE fit staff properly and provided full protection. During the peak the hospitals were running testing clinics 12 hours a day, seven days a week. A lot of people really stepped up to make that possible and I'm very grateful to the team. We have now tested over 3,000 members of staff across all of our sites, and trained around 50 additional members of staff to provide local testing.

## **How does the mask fit testing process work?**

There are two stages. We start with a sensitivity check, spraying a fit testing solution – the same substance that's used to stop children sucking their thumbs – and making sure that staff are able to taste it. If they can then we proceed with the test, showing them how to fit the mask properly and make sure that it's worn the same way every time.

Once the mask is on, we spray a stronger version of the solution into a special hood that's designed to keep the substance contained. The staff member goes through seven minutes of exercises, replicating the activity of a normal working day. If they can't taste the solution then the particles have not passed through the mask and it proves the mask fits correctly.

## **What happens if the mask doesn't fit?**

It's quite unusual, but if we can't find a mask that fits safely then the member of staff would be redeployed – in many cases becoming fit testers themselves

or taking on infection control roles, directly supporting their colleagues.

We were also involved in a project with NHS England which involved measuring 5,000 face shapes, with an aim of designing masks that will fit staff, especially BAME and female staff better.

## **What is your focus now that we've moved on to the next phase of our response?**

We're doing a lot of work on social distancing right now, looking at where we can improve distancing across our hospitals. It's important to get staff back into the building in a way that is safe and sustainable, so that we can protect staff and patients from COVID-19 while also maintaining our other services. Proper distancing and use of masks helps to ensure that staff don't have to self-isolate if their colleagues become ill.

## **What advice would you give to staff to keep themselves, colleagues and patients safe?**

We all need to follow the same guidance that you'll have heard from the government – hands, face, space – but for a healthcare setting we need to 'flip' it a little. Space: making sure that you have the full two meters distance when face to face with others whenever possible. Face: wearing a mask properly so that it covers your mouth and nose. And hygiene: wash your hands properly and wiping down surfaces when you've used them. We're trying to find ways to make it easier for everyone to follow the guidance, even when we're tired or at the end of a long shift.

## Taking care of your wellbeing

It can be easy to forget to prioritise your own wellbeing while you're giving so much to your colleagues and patients – but finding time to rest and recharge is a vital part of taking care of yourself.



For further support or someone to talk to, consider the following options:

- Visit the resilience and emotional support team (REST) hub on Freenet to find information about a range of different services and resources
- Free access to wellbeing apps until the end of December 2020 – full details found on the REST hub
- The COVID-19 advice line provides advice on topics such as self-isolation, health and wellbeing, training and flexible working. Call 020 3966 6625 (ext 31275) Monday to Friday, 8am until 5pm, or email [rf.covidadvice@nhs.net](mailto:rf.covidadvice@nhs.net)
- The Mental Health First Aiders and SISOS Listeners service in confidence on 020 7794 0500 extension: 23123 or 23028 or e-mail us at: [rf-tr.mentalhealthfirstaiders@nhs.net](mailto:rf-tr.mentalhealthfirstaiders@nhs.net) from Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm
- Contact the Samaritans (on 116 123), NHS Helpline (111) or your GP
- The COVID-19 staff support page on Freenet also has details of the Care First service, options for childcare and accommodation, and offers such as staff discounts