

On 18 October 2020, an online edition of the Scottish newspaper *The Sunday Post* carried a story about how the President of the IBMS, Allan Wilson, wrote to the Health Secretary of United Kingdom, Matt Hancock, offering the help of the membership of the IBMS to the government to increase capacity of testing for COVID-19.

Interestingly, it was reported that Matt Hancock referred Allan Wilson to the government portal for private businesses seeking to win public sector contracts. Equally intriguing is the fact that it took five months for Matt Hancock to send his response to the IBMS President.

Shining brightly

There are many conclusions that could be drawn from the newspaper report, the most significant of which is that the officer of state in charge of the health brief and his advisers did not know about one of the professional organisations whose members, through their diagnostic or screening work, have an impact on the clinical management of between 70% and 80% of patients that pass through hospitals in the UK.

Despite the perceived lack of awareness of the profession at the ministerial level of government, the IBMS and biomedical scientists at various levels have shone brilliantly and have every reason to be proud of the profession.

In the history of biomedical science as an organised and regulated profession, nothing has highlighted the importance of laboratory testing and the role of biomedical scientists like the COVID-19 pandemic.

BLAST OFF FOR BIOMEDICAL SCIENCE

Senior Specialist Biomedical Scientist **Azuma Kalu** outlines how COVID-19 has been a springboard for renewed professional advocacy.

Just as humans were finally beginning to feel comfortable as masters of the universe, for the first time in recent history, a viral pandemic has managed to touch every country and reconnect humans to their frailty.

Every government and country around the world has thrown in masses of financial and material resources to stave off the virus from unleashing maximum damage to human lives. It is beginning to look like the virus may be around for some time, so humans have to find a way to live with it.

Public awareness

COVID-19 spreads primarily through close contact from person to person, including

between people who are physically near each other. Asymptomatic carriers can also spread the virus to others.

The public awareness generated by the epidemiological attributes of the virus, as well as the well-publicised mortality associated with the infection, validates the case for well-resourced and targeted laboratory testing.

The understanding that for targeted laboratory testing to be achieved, a qualified, skilled, tried-and-tested workforce is required is central to the IBMS offer to the government.

At the beginning of the pandemic,


COVID-19 was expected to stretch the NHS to its limits, so the establishment of satellite hospitals for treatment of COVID-19 patients, such as the NHS Nightingale was a thought in the right direction, but due to the management of patient flow and the complexities of commissioning of essential and non-essential services, the Nightingale hospitals were never really put to full use. Of course, at the time of writing, with the new strain of the virus taking hold and a new lockdown in place, there's no way of knowing if they may still play a major role. However, while satellite hospitals

were created with input from representatives of nursing and doctors' professional bodies, the procurement and management of the COVID-19-related laboratory testing was done without the involvement of the IBMS and even when the profession reached out to the government, it took months to get a response.

Long-lasting leverage

It is noteworthy that despite the initial perceived lack of awareness of the professional body at the ministerial level, the IBMS has worked tirelessly to raise public knowledge of the profession and to inform decisionmakers about the vital role biomedical scientists play.

On the ground IBMS members have played an incredibly important role in the pandemic through the day-to-day analysis of COVID-19 samples and providing results for the treatment of patients, while also taking to social media to spread the message about biomedical scientists. Also, a range of senior and specialist members have engaged with the national and local media on testing-related issues around COVID-19 and worked to influence policy.

Over recent months the increased visibility of biomedical scientists has been sustained, with a constant stream of media coverage and online activity. The pandemic has allowed the profession a springboard of advocacy. I hope that the profession will continue to find these springboards to achieve the long-lasting leverage the profession deserves. 

Azuma Kalu is a Senior Specialist Biomedical Scientist at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London.

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