

MY LAB

THE LAB DOWN THE LONG CORRIDOR

Specialist Biomedical Scientist **Cherie Beckett** gives a guided tour of her microbiology laboratory in the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Harlow.

Working in a diagnostic clinical microbiology laboratory right now might feel like it has been engulfed with COVID-19 testing, but the department is about so much more. We processed almost 50,000 swabs for SARS-CoV-2 in our small laboratory in 2020, but our total number of samples processed exceeded 320,000.

Our microbiology laboratory is situated in the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow, Essex. We serve a local population of approximately 350,000, with an extended catchment of 500,000 and growing. Being a smaller laboratory, many of us are blessed with being able to work within all of our sections, which are largely divided into bacteriology, serology and now our expanding molecular section. Last year brought fresh challenges in the laboratory that we could have never foreseen. From referring 100% of our COVID-19 swabs in the very beginning, our department has successfully brought the majority of COVID-19 testing in-house, grown a strong PCR team and evolved our ways and times of working. We are currently planning an expansion of our molecular suite, which pre-pandemic comprised largely of only chlamydia and gonorrhoea PCR testing.



I could blind you all with statistics on the various achievements of our laboratory, but what really shines in our department is the team. These team members work in a hidden department, down a long pathology corridor, and work within a hidden profession. The pandemic has shone a light on microbiology, but there is still a long way to go. The nature of the work that we do means that it is often hidden from the public eye; working with biological specimens and sometimes in containment facilities, it doesn't always make for an appropriate environment to invite the public in, or even many of the wider staff in the hospital. And yet though you may not see us, we are here, providing a 24/7 service, 365 days of the year assisting in the diagnosis of sepsis, bacterial meningitis, urinary tract infections and

much, much more.

Pre-pandemic we enjoyed hosting a Harvey's Gang tour to a paediatric oncology patient to demystify the science behind why they had so many pathology tests. What was refreshing to see and helped staff realise that they do make a difference was that the young boy came to the department in tears, so afraid of his next virology blood test, but left in high spirits. I really am proud to work for a team that is so patient-centric, with every sample representing a patient. We might never meet our

patients, but they are always at the forefront of our minds.

Lastly, 2020 ended on a high with spectacular news that our esteemed Director of Infection Prevention and Control, and Microbiology Consultant, Dr Shico Visuvanathan, was awarded an MBE in the New Year's Honours List. Dr Visuvanathan humbly dedicated and accepted this award as a reflection on the wonderful infection prevention and control, and microbiology teams that she works alongside, and I feel that this really does reflect the effectiveness of our multi-disciplinary team, from administrative and clerical, to medical laboratory assistant, to biomedical scientist, to public health consultant to professor – all roles are valuable and truly make a difference. 