

Testing Times: Experiences of IBMS members during the COVID-19 pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a new coronavirus in China in late 2019¹ impacted on everyday lives across the world. By the end of January 2020 PCR protocols were available² for use in specialist centres. It became clear that the SARS-CoV-2 virus³ causes a diverse set of symptoms, making laboratory confirmation vital to understanding the epidemiology of COVID-19 disease and for controlling its spread. In the UK, the response included a combination PCR testing in existing diagnostic microbiology and virology laboratories (Pillar 1) and privately run centres which tested samples collected in the community for SARS-CoV-2 only (Pillar 2).⁴ In the UK there was a national strict lockdown , which meant that most routine treatments and outpatient clinics were suspended for a few months. These affected the nature and amount of samples being processed in diagnostic laboratories. In addition, virology, epidemiology and laboratory testing were discussed at length in the media. The professional roles of IBMS members and their work suddenly rose to prominence. But how did IBMS members feel about this? The aim of this study was to survey IBMS members and assess the impact of the pandemic on their working lives and professional attitudes.

METHOD

A questionnaire was developed which to investigate IBMS members' experiences during the pandemic . It included quantitative and qualitative items covering working environment, job satisfaction, whether they had felt supported and what it was like to have diagnostic laboratories being discussed in the media. Responses were anonymous. There were 15 questions and section for basic demographic data. It was approved by the University of Brighton Social Science Research Ethics Committee. The study was advertised through communications from the IBMS, the website and social media. It was available through a link to an online questionnaire between 14/09 and 30/11/2020. Example questions are given in Text Box 1.

TEXT BOX 1: Example questionnaire items

- * Thinking about how your working environment has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, please select the most appropriate answer: My work load: increased; stayed about the same ; decreased
- * Are you more satisfied in your work now than before the COVID-19 pandemic started? Yes, no, about the same, not sure
- * Please explain in your own words how the media portrayal of diagnostic laboratories and staff working in them during the COVID-19 pandemic

RESULTS : 1

There were 168 responses, of which 98 were suitable for further analysis. These represented a cross section of IBMS members in terms of age, gender, grade and region. Most respondents indicated that their workload had increased and 57% took on extra duties (Figure 1). A majority (80%) indicated that they were satisfied with their job overall and for 13% ,this increased during the pandemic (Figure 2).

Comments about the working environment included:

"I have got more involved in training and hence IBMS. It has given me a sense of purpose"

" I enjoy new challenges"

" I feel as though I am making a difference, but that is not recognised or appreciated outside of my profession".

Figure 1 : Changes to work practices during 2020 (n= 97)

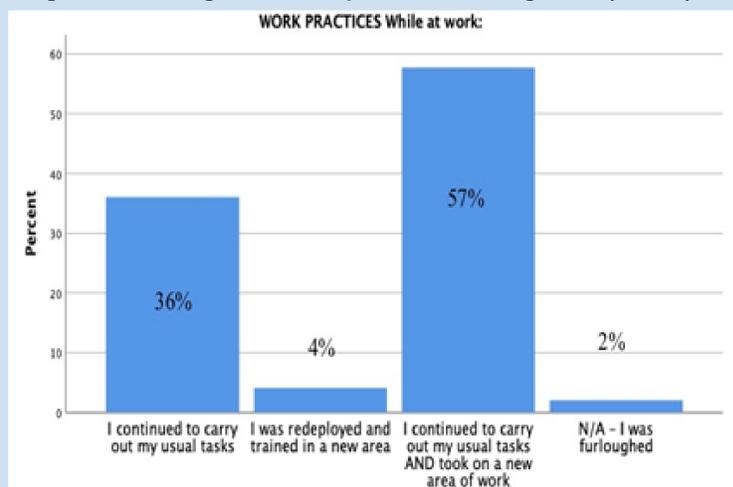
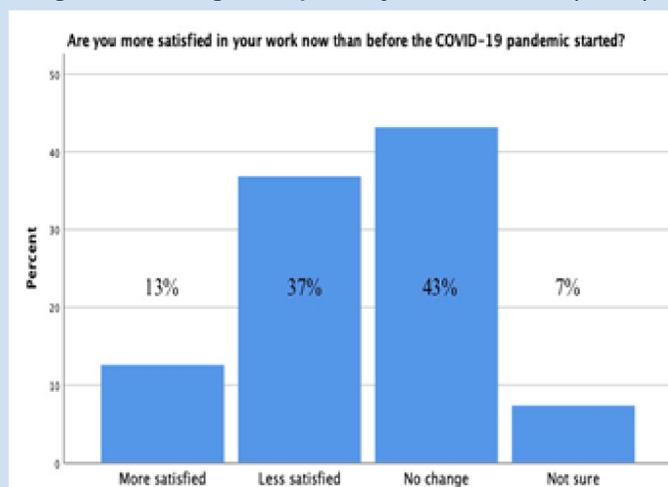


Figure 2 : Change to reported job satisfaction (n= 95)



RESULTS 2:

Most IBMS members felt that the media reports had not made them feel good (Figure 3). The comments on this topic indicated that the lack of distinction between Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 laboratories and the focus on targets and mistakes contributed to this perception. However some participants thought media attention had helped the profession.

Example comments:

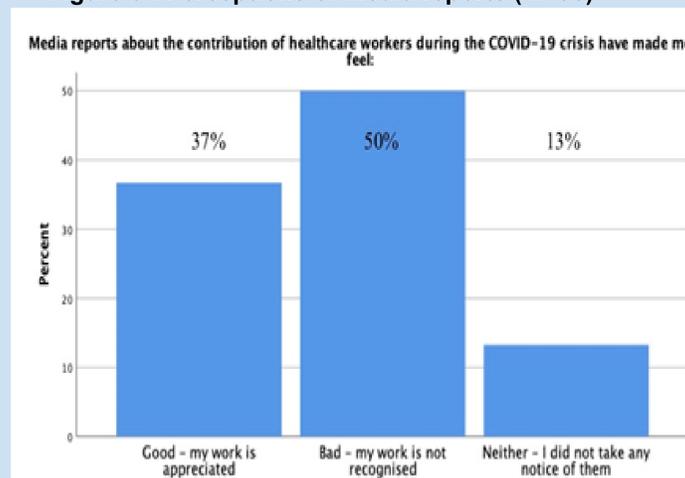
"It has shown the vital role that is played by staff in the laboratory"

" I feel valued, appreciated and fulfilled in my profession"

"I feel frustratedWhen things have gone wrong the NHS staff have been blamed and our knowledge and expertise is downplayed constantly. Whilst nursing and medical staff have rightly been celebrated, the same hasn't happened with pathology staff"

"To some extent [media] failed to recognise existing NHS lab staff. Frustrating. IBMS President has done a fantastic job in trying to rectify this issue"

Figure 3 : Perceptions of media reports (n=98)



DISCUSSION

This small survey of IBMS members has highlighted the impact that the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic had on their working lives and professional standing⁵. Although work load and working practices changed, leading to increased pressure, job satisfaction was high and in some cases it increased. Data not presented here showed respondents experienced good team work and support from their managers. Also 80% reported appreciation of the role of the IBMS in presenting them and their work to the world outside the laboratory. However , there was clear frustration with some media discussion of testing and a perception that laboratory staff are not appreciated as much as other healthcare professionals. This could be addressed in future, using the increased spotlight on diagnostic laboratory professionals during the pandemic. There is now an opportunity to build on the greater awareness of the IBMS among other healthcare workers, journalists, policy makers and the general public to enhance the understanding of the work of its members.