

# A medical student's reflections on the Manchester terrorist attack, May 2017

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It is not often in your life, let alone your career as a doctor, or at least as a medical student, that you are faced with an incident as frightening and far-reaching as the terrorist attack that befell Manchester on 22 May 2017. For me, the news arrived in the early hours of the morning in the form of panicked messages from friends and family near and far.

Too often conditioned to retreat in the face of real, high-stake clinical scenarios, on receiving the news of the attack I felt conflicted in deciding how best to respond. At the time, I had spent just a week with the orthopaedic team at the Royal Manchester Children's Hospital, mostly collecting data for a project for the medical school. It wasn't the relatively short time spent on the team that deterred me, but rather the fear of creating more hassle and workload for the doctors and nurses responding to the demands of the attack. It was a natural reaction. After all, students are not licensed to practise without the guidance and supervision of an experienced doctor.

So I decided to offer my tea- and coffee-making services; my contribution to keeping the medical force awake and (somewhat) hydrated. I arrived at the hospital alongside the first rays of sunshine that morning. I had anticipated commotion and high emotional charge, yet the hospital was a calm and quiet place, lacking its usual crowds of families and children navigating its corridors.

The theatre staffroom had transformed into the central hub for coordinating the response to the attack. Representatives from a multitude of medical teams offered their insight and expertise, as trickling through the doors arrived surgeons and doctors from nearby hospitals to offer assistance. On the wards, creating physical space for the patients taken in overnight was the order of the day. Families and patients offered their empathy, understanding and a remarkable flexibility to help the cause.

As you go through medical school – or even before you get there – it is common to have ideas about what it is going to be like to work in the hospital. Some of the ideas are largely coloured by a sense of ambition and excitement, others by a general ignorance about the realities of working as a doctor. Nonetheless, we are all bound by a desire to work together for a common goal – using our skills to provide the best care possible to patients and their close ones.

That day, I witnessed exactly what all the textbooks and motivational talks describe. There was a level of calm and control, organisation and cooperation that was, as I imagine, precisely the way that it should be. Individuals and teams supported one another and performed very well in this environment. This sort of work was what all our training had been about – the cogwheels of medicine in the NHS working at their best.

The reinvigoration of my aspirations to work as a doctor was just a small speck of the bright light cast on the wider lessons learned from my experiences on that day, and the days thereafter. Selfishly, perhaps, I also felt grateful to be able to offer some skills in response to such a terrible incident. For once I was not so powerless. Above the duties of providing hot beverages, never have I felt as helpful and responsible as a medical student – I was an extra pair of hands, an extra sounding board for the doctors. For the patients, I offered an extra set of ears.

As the ripple effect of the attack started to merge into the of the hum of the typical working week at the hospital, so the noise levels began to rise and the families started to arrive through the doors. The doctors and nurses resumed their normal duties and the medical students returned to their projects. Yet, just as the lives of the people of Manchester have been forever changed by the events of the 22 May, so has the doctor that I will soon become.

*Sara Caterina O'Rourke was a fourth-year medical student, supervised by Ms Anne Foster and Mr Fahran Ali, consultant trauma and orthopaedic surgeons, during her placement at the Manchester Children's Hospital in May 2017.*