

Spotlight Naina Chavda

Covid-19 Surge Operations Manager



Under pressure

Naina started her career working to deadlines and under intense pressure to deliver. That's been something of a feature in her professional life since.

Fresh out of university, she started a "short-term" contract at the Middlesex Hospital with a brief to set up an assay appropriate to test for HIV.

"HIV was the pandemic of the day and it was made clear to me that I had a year to deliver the assay or I'd be out of a job."

For a recent graduate, this was no mean task, but with access to any research labs she liked, Naina spent six months working out how to bring the assay into a clinical setting. She achieved that goal well within the time, and was then immediately involved in adapting the assay for leukaemia testing.

Being at the forefront of technological and scientific advances meant that Naina was in a good position when she was given the opportunity to build a new flow cytometry laboratory from scratch.

This was as a result of the merger with UCH and TDL, the first step towards becoming HSL in 2015.

"There was no interference from anyone - but I was under no illusion that I had to get it right!"

That lab is now HSL's hub for all flow cytometry testing.

Naina had been enjoying a brief change from her many years in flow cytometry when she applied for, and was appointed to, the role of operations manager for the covid surge laboratory last year.



Once again, she was involved in “building a lab from scratch” - only this time, there was the added urgency of creating capacity for Covid testing. The deadlines for setting up the surge lab were tighter than ever, plus there were the added constrictions imposed by lockdown.

“I was brilliantly supported through the whole build process,” she says. “All the team had invaluable experience from having set up the Halo. Thankfully, many of the processes involved had already been established, and all I had to do was make sure the jigsaw fitted together. And, there was always a calming voice from someone!”

The surge lab was completed absolutely on time and has been fully functional since December.

Covid-19: A bittersweet time

Naina says the pandemic has been a bittersweet time for her. While it has offered up extraordinary opportunities for her in terms of

new experiences and opportunities, like many she has worried about the effect of not being able to see her elderly parents. She’s also very aware of how some of her friends and colleagues have lost their jobs. She misses being able to socialise freely. “But, we have to emanate positivity” she says, “and not take anything for granted.”

Covid has also forced lots of innovation in terms of science: “There are lots of studies and research projects to which I’ve been able to contribute - the speed with which research has been turned into reality is incredible,” she says. “I think that as a nation we should be really proud of what we’ve achieved during Covid and hope that’ll have a positive impact on scientific research in the UK in the future.”

For someone who has been quite so hectically busy during the pandemic, perhaps what she is looking forward to most shouldn’t come as a surprise: “A picnic in the park with family... and a holiday!” Both will be well deserved.