

COVID-19 One Year On

June 2021



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WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

Healthwatch Isle of Wight is an independent champion for people who use health and social care services. We are here to make sure that those running services put people at the heart of care.

Our sole purpose is to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf. We work to get services right for the future. We are independent and committed to making the biggest difference to you.

With our focus on patient experience, the Covid-19 pandemic presented new opportunities and challenges on the way in which we garnered people's views. Social media, networking and telephone conversations took precedence where face to face conversation were no longer possible.

Working with the voluntary sector and like-minded partners, we strived to ensure that not only were we hearing people's thoughts but also helping to communicate community and national news where needed.



BACKGROUND

COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) is a severe acute respiratory virus and was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The World Health Organisation declared a worldwide pandemic on 11th March 2020, understanding that COVID-19 would not just be a public health concern, but would affect every sector.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 on the Isle of Wight was on 7th March.

On 23rd March, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a UK Lockdown, with people being told to stay at home except for limited reasons, including exercise (once per day only), food shopping and work, only if absolutely necessary. Schools were shut for most children, all non-essential shops shut, and gatherings such as weddings were cancelled.

By 12th April, the UK coronavirus death toll had exceeded 10,000 and by 5th May the UK had the highest death toll in Europe with more than 32,000 fatalities.

On 9th June, schools reopened to certain year classes, whilst maintaining 'bubbles' and social distancing. On 15th June, non-essential shops reopened in England as well as zoos, safari parks and places of worship. Face masks became mandatory on public transport.

On 4th July, the social distancing rule of 2 metres was relaxed to 1 metre and establishments such as pubs, cinemas and restaurants reopened.

Throughout this time, GPs remained open to non face to face appointments (except emergencies). Dental practices closed on the 23rd March and reopened on 8th June, subject to PPE. A dental emergency hub was introduced during lockdown, which could only be accessed via a referral from your dentist and only for emergencies.



Schools reopened in September, with social distancing enforced and face masks mandatory for secondary school pupils.

By September 7th, confirmed cases of Covid-19 passed 27 million globally and 2 days later, in fear of a second wave, the UK banned gatherings of more than 6 people.

On the 12th October, a new 3-tier system was introduced, with many places entering the highest tier immediately. The Isle of Wight was Tier 1 (the least restricted).

On the 31st October, a 4 week national lockdown in England was announced, although schools and universities remained open.

The first dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was administered on the 8th December and on the 14th, WHO issued a statement that Santa Claus is immune to coronavirus.

By December 27th, global cases passed 80 million and new strains were found in Nigeria, Sweden, Japan, Norway, Canada and Northern Ireland.

By 4th January 2021, England had entered its third national lockdown with schools closed. The UK death toll had now passed 75,000 and by the 13th January it crossed the grim 100,000 milestone.

By 14th February, 15 million Briton had received their first dose of a Covid-19 vaccine and by the end of the month, the UK recorded the lowest number of new cases in 5 months.

Schools reopen on 5th March 2021, but lockdown remains and a national day of reflection is declared to mark the 1 year anniversary of lockdown on 23rd March.



FEEDBACK

In the period 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021, Healthwatch Isle of Wight received 1415 pieces of feedback regarding Health and Social care, directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. We collect feedback through direct communications with the public, social media and surveys.

All reflections must be taken with the knowledge that at the time at which this was happening, it had never been seen in world's population's lifetime before. The world, news and infection rates were changing so quickly that it was almost impossible to keep up. Information about the virus, the way in which it spread, could be contained and infection control, was so fast paced that it was a struggle to keep up.

The Isle of Wight NHS Trust and Isle of Wight Council followed the rapidly changing guidelines from NHS England, Public Health England and the Government.

However, despite knowing all that, it shouldn't deter from the relevance or authenticity of the feedback that we received.



TOP 5 TOPICS DURING COVID-19 IN 2020

GENERAL PRACTICE — Healthwatch Isle of Wight received 657 pieces of feedback on General Practice directly relating to Covid between April '20 and March '21. This was, by far, the most talked about service.

1

“Called 200 times over 3 days. I called 111 in the end.”

2 DENTISTRY - Healthwatch Isle of Wight received 524 pieces of feedback* on Dentistry directly relating to Covid between April '20 and March '21.

“Dental Appointments are as rare as hen’s teeth at the moment.”

PHARMACY - Healthwatch Isle of Wight received 97 pieces of feedback on pharmacies directly relating to Covid between April '20 and March '21.

3

“Staff are always so helpful and go out of their way to solve any problems.”

4 INPATIENT CARE - Healthwatch Isle of Wight received 65 pieces of feedback on Inpatient Care directly relating to Covid between April '20 and March '21.

“Many thanks to the wonderful staff at St. Mary’s.”

5 MENTAL HEALTH (ADULT) - Healthwatch Isle of Wight received 61 pieces of feedback on Adult Mental Health directly relating to Covid between April '20 and March '21.

“I consider myself a strong person, but even I have had my moments during this uncertain time.”

*This includes feedback garnered from the NHS Dentistry on the Isle of Wight survey



GPs

The way in which GP surgeries operated changed dramatically and in a way that no one had seen before.

Face to face appointments were no longer available, except for those in dire need with online and telephone appointments soon becoming the norm.

Services were reduced and patient engagement paused¹.

General Practice was the most talked about health topic during the Covid-19 pandemic.

eConsult, an online platform which allows the patient to submit their symptoms to their GP surgery electronically, became common place across the Island and, in conjunction with telephone appointments, changed the way in which patients interacted with their doctor. Face to face appointments were only available for those who really needed them.

This dependence on digital engagement was concerning as many of the most vulnerable have no access to online platforms.

The differing way in which the surgeries reacted to the lockdown and the services that were reduced, coupled with the digital exclusion of some, paints a picture of health inequality – a sad indictment for a small island.

General Practice was such a cornerstone of lockdown that it is even more poignant. Worry about the COVID-19 symptoms which were expanding rapidly along with concerns about general health, non covid related, was compounded by the lack of access.

Whilst the lack of face-to-face access is understandable and under Government guidelines, it in no way negates the frustration, fear and isolation (?) patients felt at not being able to access healthcare in the way they would have otherwise done.

As the year went on, what was once a reluctant acceptance at the assumed temporary nature of the restrictive measures put in place, frustration and resignation took it's place.



A year after lockdown started, face to face appointments are still no longer readily available and there is still a heavy reliance on digital methods of engagement.

*“It’s getting ridiculous. Other forms of medical people are seeing us face to face, just not my surgery.”
(facebook)*

A year after lockdown started, there is still confusion as to the services that have been reduced and a seeming imbalance of offerings across the island.

A year after lockdown started, there is still no clarification from the Clinical Commissioning Group, the body that commissions Primary Care, about what is available, how to access your GP and to alleviate concerns.

Digital Communication – the way forward?

Conversely, some have found the new more digital way of working to be an advantage. Those who wouldn’t normally have the time, means or inclination to see a doctor face to face were suddenly able to access medical help via applications such as eConsult.

I just filled in the e-consultation form and got a phone call, didn’t need to make an appointment, it was great!

eConsult has seen to have been most useful to deal with more of the administrative requests such as doctor’s notes, repeat prescriptions and other non-urgent medical enquiries.

Surgeries have an obligation to respond to all eConsult enquiries within 48 hours, and as such, this makes it not suitable for any on the day urgent appointment requests.

The inability to physically enter a doctors surgery made the telephone a more crucial lifeline than ever before.



It is no surprise therefore, that access to GPs and getting through to the surgery was one of the most mentioned topics during this time. Unfortunately, before Covid, it was already hard to get through to some surgeries and this issue was exacerbated by lockdown.

"I called over 100 times to try and get an appointment and gave up!"

Whilst eConsult and other online tools may have their place, their place is in conjunction with normal surgery operations. During the Covid-19 lockdown, these were not normal times and the heavy reliance on these tools meant that sometimes people got frustrated with them due to the fact that they are simply not a totally suitable substitution for a human voice or a face to face appointment.

However, once surgeries are back up and running as normal, whenever that may be, eConsult and other such applications will hopefully be a useful positive to have come out of it all.



"No Internet? Tough Luck then! I just want to be able to phone and talk, is that so hard!!!"



"I really think they are all doing the best they can amidst a really difficult situation."



"I've been trying to get through to surgery for 2 days now for my son but it's just engaged all the time"



B12 INJECTIONS

Never was the importance of communication highlighted better than in the instance of B12 injections.

At the start of lockdown, NHS England suspended the **availability** of B12 injections, in order to minimise face to face care.

Those with pernicious anaemia, where normal licensed B12 oral supplements are not effective, were particularly affected by this change.

At a time where social media was being used as a quick way to gain local knowledge, it became glaringly obvious that there were differences in the way in which surgeries across the island conducted themselves. With no one clear approach, B12 injections became an issue that was widely discussed.

A lack of communications meant that people were left unaware of what was happening and what alternatives they had.

“My daughter has pernicious anaemia and needs a B12 injection every 2 months. She is well overdue for an injection and is beginning to feel more and more unwell. She has been told that no B12 injections are being given at present and there is no date given for them being resumed. She was also told to take B12 tablets, but as she is unable to absorb B12 in tablet form, this was not a helpful response. With a possible return to work on June 1st, she is understandably worried about how she will cope as her untreated symptoms grow progressively worse.”



DENTISTRY

Dentistry was an area in which we received a vast amount of feedback for. Routine appointments were cancelled and even emergency appointments were initially triaged over the phone. People were left in distress and at times, acute pain because there simply was no service available.

The emergency hub was finally introduced on 17th April, meaning that for almost a whole month people were without any emergency dental care.

The uncertainty of the time, and the excess demand for the service meant that the hub itself was guarded and only open to those experiencing the most extreme dental problems, only after being referred by their own dentist. So much so, a telephone number for the hub was not made public.

Healthwatch Isle of Wight posted on Facebook an announcement about the opening of the hub and quickly got 85 comments from people sharing their stories or asking for more information on the service.

“At my wits end and completely lose all faith in the system!!!”

Such was the consistency of the feedback regarding this topic, that Healthwatch Isle of Wight conducted a survey into Dentistry which garnered 730 responses. The NHS Dentistry of the Isle of Wight report, published in May 2021², concluded that Dentistry was **‘one of the biggest health inequalities that IOW residents face at the present time’**. This inequality was never more obvious than during Covid. The role of Covid in dentistry across 2020/2021 highlighted the inequalities of the service across the public and private sector, where private dental patients were able to access treatments refused for the NHS funded ones.



PHARMACY

With doctor's surgeries not able to take face to face walk-ins, the pharmacy was pushed into a more prominent position.

Social distancing meant that a limited number of people were allowed in the store, leading to, at times, large queues outside. There were little to no provisions for weather conditions, meaning that at times, people were waiting for potentially hours in the cold and the rain.

The majority of feedback received during this time related to waiting times.

"Its BAD long lines of sick people standing in the cold."

"They are very helpful and determined to provide exceptional customer care under any circumstances."

"[The Pharmacy] is totally overwhelmed. I have heard of people queuing in excess of 5 hours!"

"Three people in at a time. Really good at social distancing and screens up at the counters. They've done really well with it. It's better than before!"

"I've just queued for 1 1/2 hours, only to be told my prescription isn't even there yet."

"My hubby has just waited outside [the pharmacy] for 2 hours in the freezing cold with older and vulnerable people who might not have got served before they closed at 5."



MENTAL HEALTH

Lockdown and the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic led to concerns for a mental health crisis. Social isolation, the stress of enforced quarantines, lack of routine, coupled with home schooling and financial pressures, led to an awareness that mental health was potentially another 'unseen' victim of the pandemic.

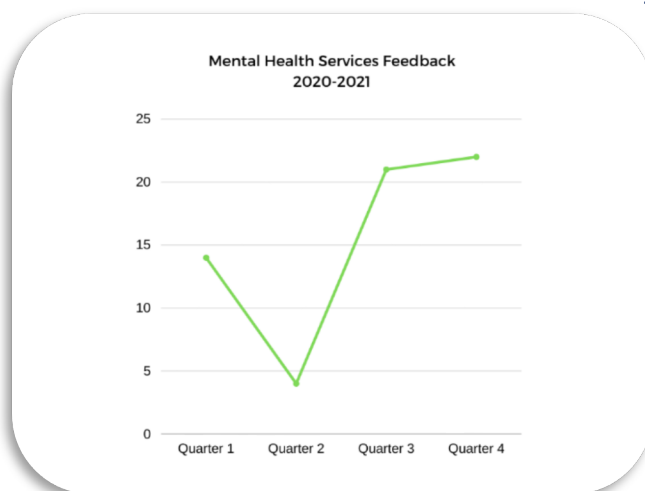
Additional mental health services were developed to try to provide support for those who were finding lockdown and the pandemic in general difficult. Mountbatten opened up a 24/7 telephone service for those who just needed a friendly voice or some company.

At the start of April, Isle of Wight Clinical Commissioning Group and Two Saints launched an online resource for those experiencing anxiety, worry or stress. This service was provided the Isle of Wight Safe Haven, who would need to be contacted prior to use.

On the 7th May, the Isle of Wight Clinical Commissioning Group launched the Isle of Wight Mental Health Hub – an one-stop site providing self-help tools, including links to apps, videos and workshops, helpline numbers and local support services and groups. lwmentalhealth.co.uk

History shows us that mental health becomes a more prominent issue after, not during a big event, such as a global pandemic. Interestingly enough, the

feedback Healthwatch received regarding mental health services increased in the last 2 quarters (October 20 – 31st March 21) of the year. The biggest test on the mental health services may not have been during this last year therefore and may be still yet to come.



YOU SAID.....

SOME OF THE THOUGHTS YOU SHARED WITH HEALTHWATCH ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH DURING THIS TIME.

“It's just the uncertainty of 'will I survive this' and 'do I want to live in a post covid world'?”

“...Covid... has affected me and made me aware that I'm not the strong person I always thought I was.”

“All the premises I've been to have all the right procedures in place and it feels quite safe.”

“I suffered with this terrible through the lockdown, it's anxiety and or panic attacks”

“I never had anxiety until COVID but now I worry about everything.”

“I'm now just taking each day as it comes some good some not so good.”

“I consider myself a strong person but even I have had my moments during this uncertain time.”

“Now it's ended (lockdown) I have still been very anxious due to Covid.”

“Telephone appointments to discuss my Mental Health did not really work.”

“There are so many having issues right now.”



INPATIENT CARE

The Isle of Wight is a one-trust island and as such, is in a uniquely precarious situation when faced with challenges that could potentially overwhelm the NHS.

Some complex procedures require travel off the island to the mainland for treatment in Southampton or Portsmouth.

NHS England cancelled (for up to 3 months) all non-urgent operations, with urgent, emergency cases and cancer treatments carrying on as normal.

Visitors to the hospital were no longer allowed and those who are medically fit to leave being discharged in order to free up hospital beds.

The backlog of operations and procedures caused an extensive waiting list with patients having to wait so long that it at times became unbearable.

“...I was totally devastated at the prospect of having to wait so long [for an operation]. The truth is that I often just sit and cry because of the pain and the effect on my mental and emotional health is so massive that at times I’ve found myself thinking the unthinkable.”

However, the overriding themes that were fed back were that the staff were highly praised but it was recognised that they were overstretched. Admiration for the NHS and keyworkers staff is evident in the comments we received.

“I have just been admitted as an emergency. They have just saved my life. I have nothing but admiration for the staff. They have been very professional and very helpful. Despite only two people with COVID the hospital is very busy.”



“Good procedures in place, staff overstretched.”

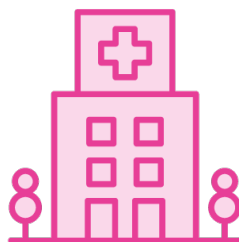
“I was in A and E Thursday. No need to have worried. Paramedics were great and staff in hospital were brilliant.”

“All social distancing was adhered to, and all staff were friendly and helpful.”

“Thank you to the NHS ambulance crew.... who took such good care of my husband today. Your dedication to your job and professionalism is greatly appreciated.”

“Just wanted to do a shout out to the lovely staff at the hospital that did my treatment today! Although we are going through a rough time, you were all so lovely and put your own worries aside to make me feel relaxed and comfortable. You’re all amazing people.”

“I was supposed to have another operation on my knee again, because of this it’s been postponed but I can’t fault them at all. It’s amazing what they do.”



COMMUNITY MATTERS

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there have been many examples of communities coming together to help in a way that was either not happening, or not being highlighted before.



Across the island, banners were put up to thank the NHS for their hard work. Many followed the national movements of rainbows in the windows or clapping on a Thursday evening. The rainbow became a symbol of hope and thanks.



Whilst playgrounds were shut, groups that ordinarily met face to face soon found their footing with online working such as Teams, Zoom and YouTube. On the island, playgroups were moved online and even with restrictions easing slightly in the summer months, many have never resumed to the in-person setting.

Local community hubs were quickly put together to help those most vulnerable. These hubs were based mostly on parish and were a mixture of council and voluntary sector led. These hubs helped with shopping, medication/prescriptions, signposting and more tellingly of the time, wellbeing checks. These hubs were aimed at the most isolated and those shielding. They were lifelines for those who were not able to leave their houses for so many reasons.

The local Hubs brought communities together at a time where so many were alone. In partnership working, the Isle of Wight Council and the voluntary sector launched an island-wide helpline which people could call to get help with all sorts - such as prescription and medication pickups, to access to online shopping to suggestions of dog walkers in their local areas. This helpline was supported by a bank of volunteers who gave their time to help those more vulnerable than they.

If you do not have a local network of friends or family to support you, please call **01983 823600** for support.

Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm
Saturday and Sunday, 10am to 3pm

HANDS **FACE** **SPACE**

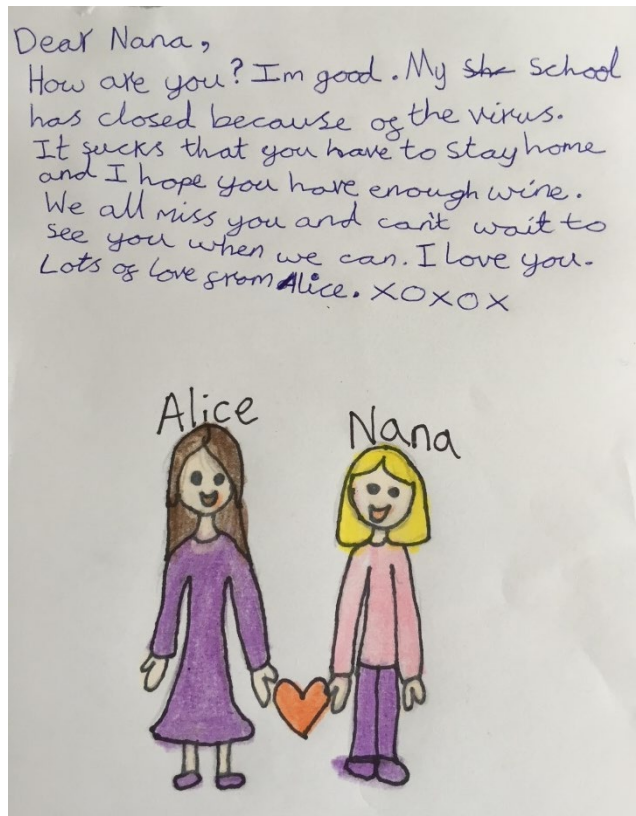
Panic buying became a national problem, and the Isle of Wight was no different. Supplies ran out of toilet roll, soap, basic staples and rationing was implemented in most stores. Priority opening was introduced for keyworkers and queues were commonplace at other times. It is with this backdrop that it becomes clear what a lifeline the community hubs became.





Empty shelves at Isle of Wight supermarkets.

Generational gaps had never been so apparent, with those most vulnerable being ordered to stay at home and isolate from all, including their families. Scenes of family visiting grandparents through windows was commonplace and writing letters to each other became a renewed way to stay in touch. Whilst those in a family unit had each other, there were many who lived alone who were at times, completely isolated. Social isolation became a very real concern.



VACCINES

In February 2021, Healthwatch Isle of Wight conducted a short survey asking the public about their attitudes towards the Covid-19 vaccination which began being administered on the island in December 2020. 58 people responded.

When asked, 52% of respondents said that 'nothing would stop them getting the Covid-19 vaccination', with 29% saying they were unsure. The main motivations for getting vaccinated were to protect friends, family and those who were most vulnerable. A larger proportion expressed a desire to have the vaccination in order to help society in general get back to normal again over protecting themselves getting Coronavirus.

Priority groups was a topic that was touched upon as a concern.

"As a key worker in a supermarket, I feel we have been forgotten about. We work around the public in small conditions with no PPE. I feel like we should be prioritised after the healthcare workers etc and vulnerable are vaccinated."

"It sometimes seems like the priority/vulnerable groups always change."

"I am a key worker and work with the public and feel that keyworkers should have had their vaccines already. Although I wear a mask and gloves at work, I feel very anxious and vulnerable. Not everyone social distances and wear masks. I can spread or catch the virus so easily. I wouldn't get paid if I didn't work so have no choice."



CONCLUSION

This look back over the last year does not reflect the devastation that has been felt for so many families. Those who have lost loved ones, lost their jobs or suffered from isolation over the last 12 months. As of 30th March 2021, 280 people had lost their lives to Covid related illnesses on the island. One cannot imagine losing a family member during a pandemic, with the added stresses and upset of social restrictions.

Whilst the pandemic continues to be far from over, there are lessons that we can already learn from the last year and experiences that have shaped us both individually and as a community.

Lives have been irrevocably changed and practices altered in a way as to be reformed.

History teaches us that poor mental health will be on the increase after a world event such as a pandemic and as such, steps must be taken now to ensure that the tools and support are in place for when they are needed.

General Practice has seen a significant shift in the way it works, and the online appointment triage that had been on the periphery before March 2020 is now commonplace and at the forefront of day-to-day engagement. Whilst digital engagement is becoming 'normal', those who are not digitally compliant have experienced a seemingly inferior service as contact with surgeries has become increasingly difficult. Hopefully, with time this digital inequality will right itself and the new methods of working will compliment the old.

However, one thing has become abundantly clear over the last year – that as a community, the Isle of Wight is an amazing place to be. The swift way in which every corner of trade, public service and office came together for one greater good of protecting the vulnerable has been awe inspiring. There are many anecdotal stories of people delivering care packages to those isolating, companies calling round vulnerable customers and volunteers signing up to help with anything from shopping, to helping with the vaccination drive.



However, the longer the restrictions apply, the more this becomes the 'new normal' and as such, health and social care settings need to find ways round the ways of working in order to make it effective, sustainable and fair for all.

Regardless of how long Covid-19 is here, or how many variations, there can be no question that the Covid-19 has changed our society fundamentally and only time will tell when or how it ends and what lessons will be learnt.



We are not in the same boat

Author Unknown

I heard that we are in the same boat.

But it's not like that.

We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat.

Your ship can be shipwrecked and mine might not be.

Or vice versa.

For some, quarantine is optimal: a moment of reflection, of re-connection. Easy, in flip flops, with a whiskey or tea.

For others, this is a desperate crisis.

For others, it is facing loneliness.

For some, peace, rest time, vacation.

Yet for other, Torture: How am I going to pay my bills?

Some were concerned about a brand of chocolate for Easter (this year there were no rich chocolates).

Others were concerned about the bread for the weekend, or if the noodles would last for a few more days.

Some were in their 'home office'.

Others are looking through trash to survive.

Some want to go back to work because they are running out of money.

Other want to kill those who break the quarantine.

Some need to break the quarantine to stand in line at the banks.

Others to escape.

Others criticise the government for the lines.

Some have experienced the near-death of the virus, some have already lost someone from it, some are not sure their loved ones are going to make it, and some don't even believe this is a big deal.

Some of us who are well now may end up experiencing it, and some believe they are infallible and will be blown away if or when this hits someone they know.

Some have faith in God and expect miracles during 2020.

Others say the worse is yet to come.

So, friends, we are not in the same boat.

We are going through a time when our perceptions and needs are completely different.

And each one will emerge, in his own way, from that storm.

Some with a tan from their pool. Others with scars on the soul (for invisible reasons).

It is very important to see beyond what is seen at first glance. Not just looking, more than looking, seeing.

See beyond the political party, beyond biases, beyond the nose on your face.

Do not underestimate the pain of others if you do not feel it.

Do not judge the good life of the other, do not condemn the bad life of the other.

Don't be a judge.

Let us not judge the one who lacks, as well as the one who exceeds him.

We are different ships looking to survive.

Let everyone navigate their route with respect, empathy and responsibility.



REFERENCES

1. Patient engagement was paused between March – September (?) 2020
2. Healthwatch Isle of Wight Dentistry Survey – May 2021

