

# Maintaining a practice during COVID-19

By Renée Bianchi

This piece is fairly short but has taken some time to write, as I juggle work and a toddler; trying to keep the child entertained, and not sending emails or messages or calling random people, or just waiting until she is asleep (I really wish she had not dropped her daytime nap during this period!). A lot of work is done between 8.00pm and midnight.

I had not really worked from home before (except a few days here and there) and while I had the ability to send emails from my phone, iPad or laptop, not much else had been set up. Having to move everything home, including five boxes of briefs, meant completing my set up so I could run my practice anywhere.

The first few weeks of restrictions was a time of uncertainty for everyone, and I found this period the most difficult, as we all tried to find the best ways to do what we do. As the weeks have passed, we have all become better at the various methods of technology we need to utilise. The flexibility of how we do what we do is one thing I hope we take forward from this pandemic.

After the first few weeks, we returned our toddler to childcare (she attends two days per week) and I returned to working from chambers occasionally, with the days gradually increasing as the weeks have gone by.

One of the reasons was that my working from home setup was not ideal. I had a laptop at the dining table. The only table we have, and the same table shared for mealtimes. Most teleconferences and videoconferences were conducted with my toddler just out of range, sitting at the table next to me.

I have been fortunate that work has continued. The diary has continued to fill up. Appearances at directions hearings have continued, as have mediations. Urgent applications before the Duty Judge have occurred, and my husband got a front row seat to what appearing before the judge 4.00 pm one day to have submissions drafted and be ready for hearing at 8.45 am the next day can be like. I have conducted a hearing and while it ran fairly smoothly, the effect of cross-examination was not quite the same on Microsoft Teams.



Renée Bianchi working from home (photographer: Georgiana, aged 2 years)

Working during this period has been challenging at times. My husband is a pharmacist and his work just got busier. This meant that when he was not at home, I was home trying to juggle a toddler and work commitments. This has led to some entertaining times – whether it be my toddler speaking in the background with one judge even thanking my ‘instructing solicitor’ for appearing, to the sounds of Bluey and Peppa Pig as background noise in many calls and videoconferences, to her and the dog creating minor flooding in the kitchen during a client conference, to makeup smeared across our kitchen walls during one mention, to her needing to use the toilet during a callover appearance before the CJ in Eq and in that same call having to console her after she fell down some stairs (thank goodness for the mute button for both incidents). My ability to multitask has really improved.

The uncertainty of income. While always a concern when one is self-employed, I, like many others, did not know what effect this would have on my income. Our Floor actively sought to reduce overheads and provide a reduction in rent to members.

I have missed being in chambers and being

able to bounce things off my colleagues. Being at the Bar can be lonely, and during this time, that has been felt. I have missed face-to-face appearances. On a lighthearted note, I will miss being able to ‘appear’ in court in pyjamas and ugg boots, and for mediations, being business attire up top and casual on the bottom.

While there have been some challenging and/or frustrating times, there have also been some wonderful ones. The main one being spending more time with my family; another being the collegiality and collaboration of the profession as we all muddle through.

I end with two anecdotes. The first is that my toddler sent a message to one of my instructing solicitors, with a picture attached saying ‘You and I are more than friends. We’re like a really small gang.’ Who knows where and how that was found, at least the solicitor took it well. The second is that one Saturday evening, my toddler went to the laptop, and announced while sitting down that she was going to email ‘her judge’, then reached across for one of my briefs, a notepad and pen. She also regularly grabs my phone and says she is speaking to ‘judge’. I apologise to the judiciary. **BN**