Doctors from the BMJ and BMA recount their experiences after a bomb exploded outside BMA House

A taste of metal and a smell of burning flesh

Kieran Walsh *BMJ Knowledge*

I'd never heard a bomb before yesterday and what I remember most is not the boom but the whooshing sound afterwards. Friends from Northern Ireland tell me that the vacuum left by the explosion causes this. Then came a noise of showering glass and seats and people landing on the road. I was sitting at my desk looking forward to a day of editing and meetings and my initial thought was, "I'm going to have to cancel my 10 o'clock meeting."

Everyone in BMJ Knowledge and in the BMJ walked down the stairs and out of the back of the building. Some people were crying but nobody panicked. When I got into the courtyard, I thought I'd better go out the front and see if I could help.

There was a shiny black car abandoned in front of the building—its front window had been shattered by a piece of flesh. There was a double decker bus outside the building. The top of it was blown off. Seats and passengers had been blown as much as 7 metres away. A few bystanders were sitting down and holding people's hands. I recognised six or seven doctors from BMA House, and many helpers were lay people. A cook from across the road was handing out plastic gloves to protect people's hands from glass and blood. Porters and security guards were giving out blankets. A few passengers were clearly dead and others were groaning and crying out.

Some young looking policemen wanted to be told what to do. But once again there was no panic. The injuries that people had were compound fractures, burns, lacerations, blast injuries, neck injuries, and some severe head injuries. There was blood and flesh on the walls of BMA House, up to the second floor. I

could taste metal and smell burning flesh.

It was 18 months since I had last seen a patient, and my specialty was geriatric medicine. I remembered the ABC—airway, breathing, and circulation. I held people's hands and told them to hold on, that the ambulances were coming, that I could hear sirens, and that they would be here in a minute. What I was thinking was that there could be another bomb on the bus and not to get too close to it. A brave few were taking someone off the bus, using a fold-up desk as a stretcher.

More senior police started to arrive. They said that we should move people into the courtyard of BMA House. Cervical collars started to arrive and we moved people into the middle of the courtyard and then into the members' meeting room as it had started to drizzle. I felt safer—the walls of BMA House are thick. I put in a couple of cannulas and got a few drips running. Some of the people there knew about major inci-

dents and took charge. Most of the patients held on until emergency doctors in orange boiler suits arrived.

Thirty minutes later it was virtually all over—only a few patients with minor injuries were left and plenty of doctors. After a couple of debriefs from BMA management, I started to walk home towards south London. I walked to Elephant and Castle and without thinking waited for the 343 bus. A guy in a silver car pulled up and asked if anyone was going to Peckham so I hopped in. When I asked him where he was from he said, "East." He was giving a lift to a psychiatric nurse and her two kids to Peckham—she didn't know him either. Coincidentally, her baby was called Kiran, which is the Indian version of my name. We showered our driver with praise and told him he was an angel taking us to the promised land of Peckham, but he just laughed and listened to the radio and said that "the government aren't telling us nothing." □

The bus, the purse, and the limb

Andrew Dearden *BMA*

As I was leaving the BMA flat where I had spent Wednesday night, I heard a loud "whoomp-ing" sound. I thought it may have been a crash, but the sound was very loud—a big sound that resonated. As I reached the foyer of the flats, I looked down the road towards BMA House. I saw the bus about 20 metres away.

As I ran over I could see scattered glass and metal fragments. As I got closer still, I could see pieces of material and people's possessions strewn around. I saw a woman's purse. Then I ran past a dismembered limb on the ground and noticed other parts of human bodies. Three of my most vivid images of the day were the bus, the purse, and the limb. Each seems to say something of the tragedy and pain of the day.

At the scene, doctors were tending to people on the ground. Firstly, I helped move a person who seemed trapped under a car. We had to stabilise a badly broken ankle before it was possible to move them into the

BMA's courtyard. Then I helped a man with multiple fractures to limbs, one extremely serious fracture to his lower leg. A younger doctor and I put lines into opposite sides. I remember thinking that this man was likely to lose his leg, so great was the injury to it.

I don't remember much screaming. Just those giving care shouting for the things they needed. The police and paramedics were great. It seemed that whenever I asked for something—scissors, tape, fluids, boards to splint fractures—it appeared within a few seconds, brought to me by those supporting us as we provided the direct care.

The BMA's staff were fantastic. They took tables apart so we could have something to move patients on. They pulled the injured from the bus, carried them inside once we had stabilised them, and kept finding things that we needed to provide immediate care to the injured people. Looking back now, I become emotional with pride to

The bus outside BMA House a few minutes after the explosion, with the bus driver, George Psaradakis, on the right

remember what the BMA as a whole, doctors and staff alike, were able to do.

Once the patients I had been helping were stabilised and had sufficient medical cover, I began to help with distributing supplies, such as intravenous fluids and oxygen. We nearly ran short a few times, but as soon as I thought we were going to run out of something, another ambulance turned up with further supplies.

Once we had got the severely

injured on to ambulances and to hospitals, the walking wounded began to arrive at BMA House to be seen before being transported to hospital.

After the injured had left BMA House, we began to care for the carers. We raided the BMA's kitchens for sandwiches, rolls, chocolates, fruit, crisps, and drinks, which we distributed to everyone. I think it took us about 2-3 hours to move, treat, and get all the seriously wounded people to hospital.