

When Stonewall Burk and his wife Lyn emigrated to the UK from Canada in January 2020, they could never have envisaged what the next two years would entail. Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the pair have played a crucial role in helping the country tackle the virus. In the early days, Lyn was working in intensive care units (ICUs) and for the past year, Stonewall has been a stalwart vaccinator at Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust's (CCS) large-scale vaccination sites. Here he shares their story...

"When we moved to the UK, our plan was for Lyn to work in the NHS as a radiographer and mammographer and I intended finding a job in the locale where she was employed. I'm an engineer by trade and had my own heating and cooling company in Canada, so becoming a vaccinator certainly wasn't on my list of career choices!

"During the first wave of the pandemic, Lyn worked on the frontline as a radiographer in Glasgow. She was taking chest x-rays in the ICUs which required wearing the full hazmat suit. It was a pretty scary time as a lot of healthcare workers were getting very sick and dying from the virus.

"I wanted to do what I could to help and began looking for opportunities to volunteer. There was a middle school across the street that was making scrubs for NHS workers and when I enquired, they asked if I could sew and I said, 'No but I can follow a pattern and use scissors' and that's what I did for four months.

"Because of my trade background, my hand strength is a little different and while others' could cut through two layers of cloth, I could cut through six or seven, so after a while it was just me doing all the cutting. They told me to pick out patterns I thought looked good together and cut those and send them into the sewing room, so I was digging through sheets, tablecloths and curtains and we created a lot of unique and fun designs.

"Fast forward a year and after moving to Cambridge, I joined CCS' large-scale Covid vaccination programme, having been inspired by my wife's dedication and the risk she was willing to expose herself to while treating patients when we knew very little about the virus.

"I used to take care of my own animals (horses, dogs, alpacas) in Canada which involved some administering of medicines. I figured vaccinating was similar in some respects and a skill I could learn to help us get through the pandemic as quickly as possible.

"After completing the training, I began vaccinating in May 2021 and I've now administered almost 19,000 vaccinations!

"I work five days a week and have been based at CCS' vaccination sites at the Grafton Centre, Cherry Hinton and Chesterton Indoor Bowls Centre.

"Several people have asked if I get bored as I'm doing the same thing every day, but my answer is always 'No!' because I'm vaccinating somebody new every three minutes and that's always a lot of fun. Every day is a highlight as I get to connect with and help a lot of different people.

"Vaccinating the kids has been particularly fun. We've tried to make our vaccination sites as child friendly as possible and I've even worn Spiderman scrubs which were made by Scrubs for Cambridgeshire.

“The most challenging aspect of the role is dealing with folk who are needle phobic but equally that can be very rewarding as it’s always gratifying when you can help them work through their fear and get vaccinated.

“When people arrive who are fearful, I find distraction is the best technique, so I try and engage them in conversation straight away. I’ll ask how their day’s going and hopefully get them talking about something they’re interested in and then once they’re comfortable and relaxed it’s easier to vaccinate them.

“I think the most important skill when vaccinating is people skills and having been self-employed, the customer care and personal interactions go hand in hand with what we do every day here.

“The busy days are the best days and in the winter, we were vaccinating 1,000/1,200 people a day.

“A year ago, I never thought I’d still be vaccinating now but I really enjoy it! The whole team is always very supportive and there’s a great sense of camaraderie.

“The vaccination programme has come a long way and in December I got involved with the training side of things. My education degree and prior experience teaching at one of the polytechnic schools in Canada lent itself to this and, as well as running training sessions for new recruits, I’ve also helped to develop some of the current training materials.

“I’m an avid photographer and my initial goal when we came to the UK was to do more photography and when I looked at the training programme, I suggested adding some photos and screenshots to the training materials and PowerPoints.

“I definitely feel a sense of pride working for the NHS and intend to keep vaccinating for as long as possible. As two Canadians, both Lyn and I are very humbled that we’ve had the opportunity to work for the NHS and help get our Commonwealth friends through the pandemic.”