

**Former Chair of Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust (CCS), Heather Peck has had a busy career mainly in agriculture. She's been a civil servant in the Ministry of Agriculture/Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) and has also bred both sheep and alpacas commercially. Here Heather explains how she recently added humans to her species list as she became a volunteer vaccinator at CCS' large-scale Covid vaccination sites in Lowestoft and Norwich.**

"Around the beginning of 2021 my attention was drawn to an advert seeking volunteers to help with the Covid vaccination effort in Norfolk. Once I realised they were willing to train lay people as opposed to only medically and clinically qualified people I thought, surely I could do that?! I'm not at all squeamish or worried about needles and I've vaccinated many hundreds of sheep, cattle and alpacas. Provided I remember not to turn anyone upside down and mark the backs of their necks with wax crayon when injected, how hard can it be?"

"I did some research online and discovered I needed to signal my willingness to help via St John Ambulance who were delivering the training.

"In February I was accepted onto the training course and did innumerable online training sessions, followed by a full day of training at the University of East Anglia (UEA). We were a very varied bunch of volunteers; several were students, one was a beautician more experienced with Botox than vaccines, one was animal orientated like me but much more skilled as he was a vet and one was a retired dentist.

"We all got the same training which involved lots of practising vaccinations and lots of practising putting on and off PPE, plus all the emergency stuff which you shouldn't really need a) because it's very rare it happens and b) because you're surrounded by healthcare professionals when you're actually vaccinating but even so it's good to know that if you're in a crisis and you're the person nearest you know what to do, whether that's dealing with anaphylactic shock or CPR.

"The hardest part of the training was delivering a full two minutes of cardiac massage to an artificial torso. It's harder work than you'd think, and if you have a titanium knee joint like me, kneeling on a hard floor is no fun either. I decided that if I was in that position I was going to take a leaf from Casualty and yell 'Can I have some help here!'.

"Fast forward three months and I've now completed several shifts as a volunteer vaccinator and can honestly say I've rarely enjoyed work more. The only experience similar was managing animal health emergencies when I was at Defra. There is the same team effort, the same clarity of objective, and the same pride in outcomes.

"Justine, the supervisor in Lowestoft, was extremely welcoming on my first day and did a brilliant job showing me around the site, she was excellent.

"Everybody is just so pleased to get vaccinated that you finish the day with a lump in your throat and the people around you are all motivated to do the best they can as well. It's a terrific team effort so, all in all, it's an extremely positive experience – I couldn't recommend it more as a volunteer!

"We also have a little fun and I've lost track of the times I've asked elderly gentlemen if they have any allergies and they've replied, 'Yes, my wife!' Humour has definitely helped people get over their fear of vaccination.

"On one occasion a lady came in and her partner said it was her third attempt to get through the door, she was absolutely terrified. The care team were already in action providing reassurance and we said, 'She'll be fine, we'll look after her'. The lady came and sat down and within minutes we'd got her laughing, partly I have to say because of the questions we have to work through. Here is someone who's terrified of vaccinations, and one of the first questions you ask is 'Have you had a vaccination in the last seven days?' Then you get onto 'Have you taken part in any vaccine trials?' and by this time I'm saying, 'I rather think I know the answer to this one, but I have to ask you anyway!' So by the time I got as far as asking 'Is there any chance you might be pregnant?' her partner who was standing

behind us said, 'My God I hope not!' the lady was laughing heartily and on the principle I don't think you can panic and laugh at the same time, I thought this was good and she was absolutely fine.

"The big positive from being a volunteer vaccinator is just a feeling that you've done a bit to help. One gentleman tried to give us some money and we said 'No, a) we're not allowed and b) we're doing this because we want to do it. I know on other shifts people have brought in boxes of chocolate - they've just been so grateful to get their Covid vaccination and so you certainly feel appreciated, it's absolutely brilliant!"

In her spare time, Heather's also been busy writing and her debut novel 'Secret Places', a crime story with a theme around domestic abuse was published in February 2021.