

# MINISTER ON A MISSION



## CONTROLLING COVID

BY ANNABEL COOPER

### THE HON. KIM WILSON ON COVID-19 AND WHAT IT IS LIKE LEADING A COUNTRY THROUGH A DEADLY PANDEMIC AS MINISTER OF HEALTH. AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

**W**hen did you first hear about COVID-19 and when did you realise how serious it was going to become?

I recall hearing about it in the press in late January, early February, and then quite quickly we realised this was starting to travel the world and that Bermuda, because of the international travel destination that we are, was likely to feel the effects.

**On realising this was a global pandemic that would impact Bermuda, what was your immediate reaction and what model did the government follow?**

There was no rule book. When I was pregnant there were all these guides and parenting books that were useful, but there's no rule book with respect to COVID-19. The model the government used was to move swiftly to isolate the virus by closing the borders

as quickly as we did; to utilise communication strategy to make sure everyone applied the mitigants—physical distancing, wearing a face mask and so forth; and ramping up our testing capabilities so we were able to test for COVID-19.

**What was the bar set at when designing the action plan?**

Because we recognised it was a pandemic and couldn't be eliminated, we had to take drastic steps to contain the spread and flatten the curve. We wanted to make sure we could minimise the impact. We didn't want to have our health-care system overburdened by the pandemic.

**Did you think people would comply with government regulations and guidance or did you think you would have a battle on your hands?**

Initially, probably for a minute, I thought we might have a battle, but because of social media and mass media which showed the seriousness of COVID-19 that assisted in communicating the

message about the need for physical distancing, because people were seeing what was happening worldwide. We've had a really high level of compliance.

Unfortunately, social media is also a challenge. We noticed a lot of people having false information about COVID-19 from reading inaccurate information on social media, which is why we kept trying to enforce the message that for accurate information please go to the government and Ministry of Health websites.

**As we speak, there are only a few imported cases of COVID-19 in Bermuda. Do you think we are over the worst of this pandemic?**

No, not at all. There is no vaccine and there is no cure and so the best that we can do is to continue the messaging with respect to the mitigants. That's our new normal—wearing face masks and physical distancing and hand hygiene is just going to be part and parcel of our everyday life. We're not expecting a vaccine for at least a year, which is hopeful.

**Looking back on the last five months, was there a time when you were truly scared or lost confidence?**

I wouldn't say I lost confidence, but there were moments when I was worried and felt scared. The beginning stages of our testing regime when we were short of testing supplies and there was a worldwide shortage of elements of PPE (personal protective equipment), so we were all fighting to gather the same items, then we'd think we were getting it, then we'd get an embargo from the United States and they would say "No, we're not shipping it overseas." There were some times that were very scary trying to acquire some of our testing supplies and needs.

When the deaths started occurring that obviously caused fear in my heart and just concern for families that were going to have to experience the loss of a loved one to something that's so public.

**Now that we have successfully entered phase 4, what is your overarching feeling about your role as the Minister of Health for a country in the middle of a pandemic?**

We as a country have done really well. We have pulled together. We've had some hiccups and we recognise that, but overall, we've been well-suited as a country to meet the demands insofar as abiding by the public health guidelines.

As a minister I hate to be the one always bringing the bad news—reminding people to wear their mask and physically distance. I sound like a broken record, but all the evidence supports that those simple behaviours help minimise the spread of COVID.

**What surprised you the most over the last five months?**

By the time we entered into the shelter-in-place phase, I was pleasantly surprised at the level of compliance, recognising that that was a very challenging time for many families and households, to be balancing work as well as childcare all under one roof.

**How did your family feel about the situation?**

The Sunday afternoon when the Cabinet had met in an emergency session, and that was the decision to go ahead and close the borders, I came back to the office and I was working, but in back of my mind I'm thinking "I've got to get my kids home."

One is in boarding school and one is at university. As the mother, that's my role, I'm the one that tries to maneuver the travel arrangements, so I'm sitting here working and I'm thinking "Kim, you've got to stop, you need to just call Air Canada."

I'm trying to deal with things on the national level, but at the

same time recognising if I don't get my children home in two days it's going to be problematic so I had to put the phone down and make some reservations, and it's probably the quickest two reservations I ever made.

I had to call my daughter and say, "You're coming home tomorrow. Don't pack, just grab your stuff." I have a tremendous support system with respect to my husband and he kept the house organised and ticking while I was at the ministry working 16–18-hour days.

from that. If persons aren't able to feed their family that has ramifications from a health perspective.

Looking at all those in totality, as well as recognising the spread of COVID, I think that striking the balance with respect to opening the borders was a tough call. Implementing and recognising that we had such a robust testing regime to identify and isolate any potential persons that have COVID helped to mitigate, in my mind, the opening of the borders.

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**We understand that we have to open our borders to survive, but do you worry that everyone's hard work will be for nothing when people start arriving in large numbers?**

It is a really tough balance because I recognise that our economic survival depends on us having tourists and international travel. We would have to open the borders at some point.

Another aspect of public health is poverty and what stems

**Are you proud of how you and the rest of the Premier's team handled the pandemic?**

Yes, I am. I think under the Premier's leadership we've made some very tough decisions and have acted very quickly, based largely on the scientific evidence that we had at our disposal, which kept evolving. We did what we had to do and we have got to the point of having sporadic cases within this five month period of time.

We will see more cases now that the border is open, we know that. However, I think the aggressive testing regime we have established will help to minimise that. The emphasis has to be on identification and isolation.

**Has coping with this existential threat driven more bipartisan cooperation?**

I'd like to think so because we've seen all walks of life in Bermuda washing their hands, wearing the face mask and physically distancing. The MarketPlace is right here and I'll see people standing and if somebody came behind them, you could see them shuffling them back and saying "Go back six feet"—in humour, not trying to be offensive, but people were like, "Oh yeah, let me give you some space."

Everyone recognised that COVID-19 sees no race, creed, religious denomination or political affiliation. The fact we are all subjected to this disease helped everybody recognise we are all in this together and we can either sink or swim.

**Do you think there will be a vaccine to protect us against COVID-19 in the relatively near future? If there is, do you know how the distribution and availability of this vaccine will work?**

There are a number of labs throughout a number of jurisdictions trying to work on a vaccine. We've got the smartest scientists throughout the world trying to explore scientific ways for cures

or vaccines. When it becomes available, nobody really knows, but right now many of the vaccines that we do have in Bermuda are supplied to us through Public Health England and the Pan American Health Organization.

We expect the collaboration we have with those two agencies to continue, so when a vaccine does become available, they will no doubt assist us in securing sufficient supplies.

**The COVID action plan must change eventually toward an economic recovery. How will success be measured in that regard?**

Economies around the world are suffering as a result of COVID and Bermuda is no different. We've seen our GDP contracting, we've seen an increase in unemployment as a result of businesses closing because of the shelter-in-place and again, this is in jurisdictions all around the world.

As we look towards an economic recovery plan to address the negative aspects of COVID, what we would do is try to minimise the impact as best as possible and that's the best measure of success.

**Where do you think we might be in five years time? Do you think COVID-19 is going to have a material impact on the way we live our lives?**

I'm fairly confident that in five years we would have had a cure, or herd immunity or a vaccine, so I don't think we'll be living with this pandemic in five years

but I think that we will see changes in the way that businesses operate. We will see a lot more online business operations. You do lose that human touch, but I think that's probably going to continue and develop further even in the post-COVID era.

I'd like to think that people will be more conscious of simple things like hand hygiene because we still have influenza that comes up seasonally.

I think we're going to remember and live with the effects of

We just started to have a slight reprisal where we said, especially myself and the top executives, "You work Saturday and you're going to be off on Sunday" and we started that around Mother's Day. I remember that because that was the first Sunday I didn't work since February. Now that the borders are opening, we're seeing our long hours come back.

I haven't had a work-life balance since this started. None of us have. I work with an incredibly committed, devoted,

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COVID-19 for many, many years to come.

**How have you coped with this situation personally?**

I honestly don't know. There have been days when I would just sit in my car and cry from exhaustion and stress. I'm spiritual so I know there's a reason to this calling and that I've been put in this place at this time. I pray and I trust in God for His guidance and strength during what has been the toughest period of my professional and political life.

professional team and the support that we give each other, and the recognition that they are genuinely committed to this is what helps get through the days and nights because we're here together day and night.

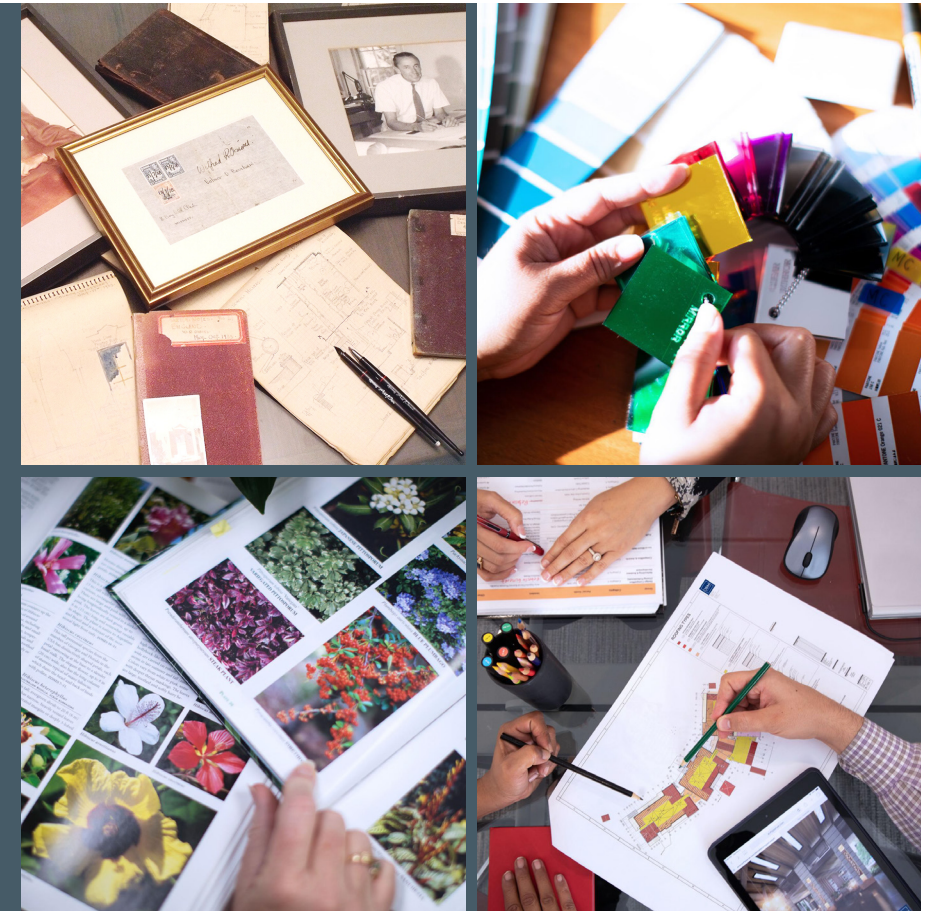
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