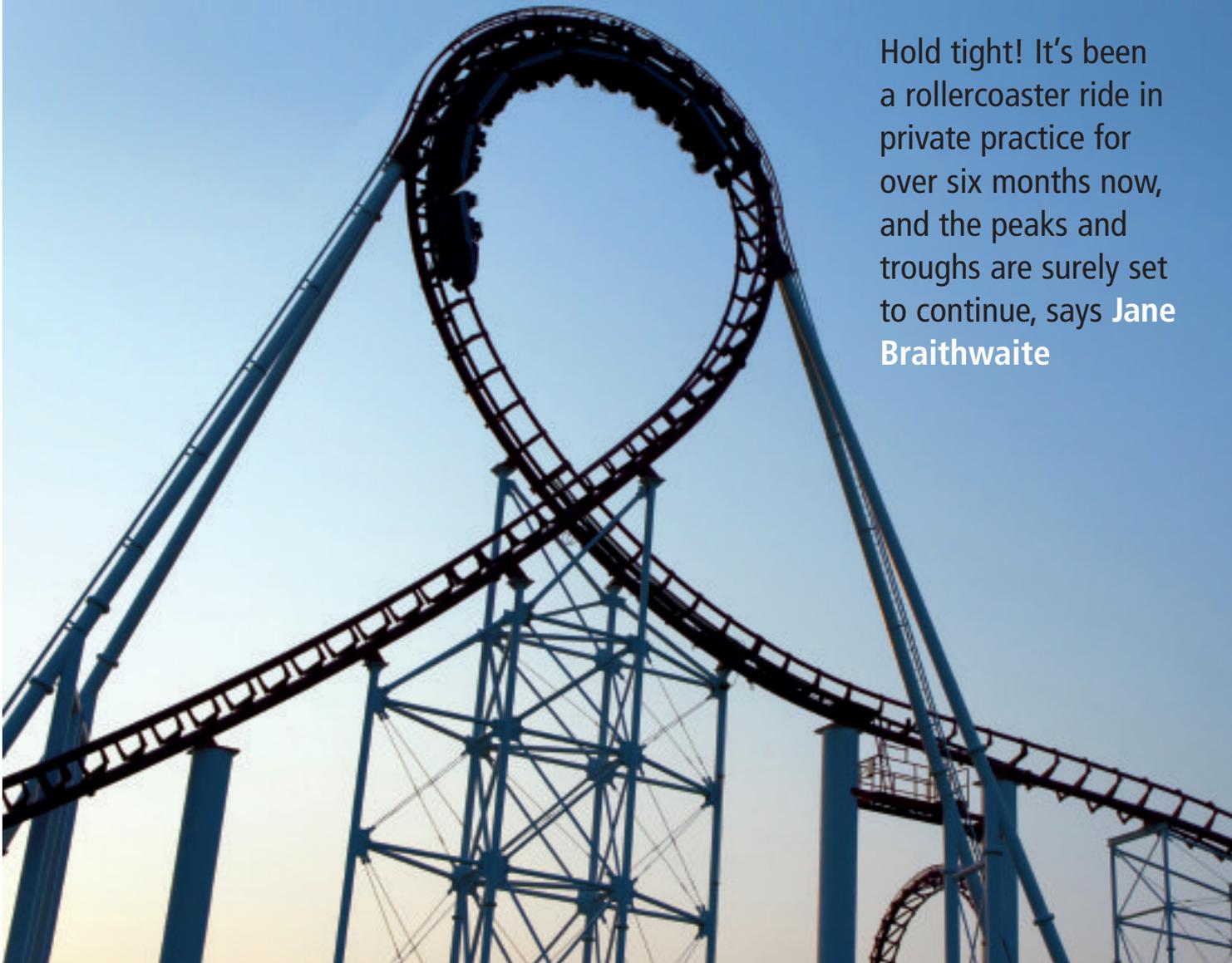


PRIVATE PRACTICE FROM THE FRONT LINE

Keep your seat belt on – it's not over yet!

Hold tight! It's been a rollercoaster ride in private practice for over six months now, and the peaks and troughs are surely set to continue, says **Jane Braithwaite**



THE WORLD of private practice is ever-evolving and this year has been more transforming than ever before. It's best described as a rollercoaster ride with more fear than thrills.

I am sure many of my colleagues in private healthcare might use slightly stronger language to describe the challenges that we have all faced.

From the perspective of the patient, the impact of Covid has been enormously significant in their ability to utilise the services we offer and many potential patients will be suffering in silence, too anxious to go out into the world to address the symptoms they are experiencing.

Only time will reveal the true extent of this. Many patients who were receiving, or due to receive, treatment in the early part of 2020 have suffered delays in treatment and this is going to be an ongoing problem for some time to come as we struggle to catch up.

Rise of telehealth

The rapid increase in telehealth during lockdown was initially a challenge for many consultants, private GPs and patients, but has been a success in many respects and looks set to continue into the longer term.

I recently discussed this with Mr Nick Panay, consultant gynaecologist in reproductive and post-reproductive medicine and director of Hormone Health, which has clinics in Harley Street and Nottingham.

He told me: 'We kept our Hormone Health service going by offering virtual consultations over lockdown and now at least half our consultations are still by phone or video, as this suits our patients' requirements.

'We have also continued to provide helpful information to our women on health-related issues through social media, webinars and podcasts.

'It has been a challenge being able to fit in the cancelled or postponed consultations and we have seen a particular growth in our requests for new consultations.

'The pandemic has shown us how important it is for quality of life, hormonal and general health to be maintained during this difficult time. Optimising lifestyle and



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Gynaecologist Mr Nick Panay



Dietician Nigel Denby

diet underpins any hormonal interventions.'

Nigel Denby, a registered dietician who is part of the team of consultants within Hormone Health at 92 Harley Street, supports Nick's view.

He reflects: 'I found so many women are more relaxed and able to focus on the advice during video consultation. No travelling or stress trying to find the clinic or get there on time means they are calm, receptive and ready to get on with the job in hand - it's a win, win.'

Face-to-face consultations

I have spoken to many other consultants, who like Nick and Nigel, plan to make virtual consultations part of their ongoing service.

But there are others who feel very strongly that face-to-face consultations are essential for their patients, and this could either relate to the particular specialty, the patient demo-

graphic or perhaps the consultant's personal dislike of the concept.

To get the most accurate view of how private healthcare is performing, we need to look at the finances and the data published by Healthcode provides us with valuable insights (see page 4).

Its data reports that, during lockdown, invoice numbers were down 60%. But coming out of lockdown the data shows a pick-up in the number of face-to-face consultations.

It is particularly interesting, too, that the number of self-pay invoices is increasing and is higher than pre-Covid levels and, sadly, this may be due to longer NHS waiting lists.

Daily frustrations

On a day-to-day basis, there are numerous Covid-related frustrations. The additional overhead of Covid testing is having an impact both in terms of administration, logistics and timing. The ability to book surgery is a problem in many specialties and at many private hospitals.

There has been significant change in many aspects of private practice with some practitioners finding working in a virtual manner complements their practice and specialties, while others have found it lacking.

Although we are seeing good growth in recent weeks and months and a return in confidence, that is now being threatened by daily reports of increasing cases of Covid.

I am not sure anyone can predict exactly what will happen in the next six months, but it is safe to assume it will continue to be a rollercoaster ride of sorts.

■ See how Covid will affect your private practice, page 44

Jane Braithwaite (below) is managing director of Designated Medical, which offers business services for private consultants

