'MUCH-NEEDED DOLLOP OF HOPE': A health worker administers a dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine to a man at a vaccination centre set up in Fiumicino, near Rome's international airport yesterday PICTURE: Alessandra Tarantino/AP

I've had the jab and it feels great

Alex KANE

THE Acute Services Block at the Ulster Hospital is one of the ugliest buildings in Northern Ireland, yet I was very happy to be there last Friday evening.

I was attending for the first round of my Covid-19 mRNA Vaccine BNT162b2: or the 'jab', as just about everyone calls it.

Fair enough, it wasn't providing me with either a cure or, indeed, automatic protection from the virus: but at least it was a much-needed dollop of hope after months of gloomy statistics, rising death tolls and worrying stories of 'long Covid', mutant variations and "ongoing, difficult-to-predict long-term consequences for the elderly and vulnerable" (as the medical/scientific advisers at the afternoon press conferences cheerily describe it).

But even the feeling of hope didn't hide the fact that it was one of the oddest experiences of my life. I was with dozens upon dozens of others in the 65-69 category: masked, three feet apart, shuffling from one yellow-sign-on-the-floor to another and checking, double-checking and then checking again that we had some form of identification and proof of the appointment.

And having done that we slipped them into zipped pockets (big, comfy anoraks were, by a country mile, the clothing of choice on that cold night), zipped them up, patted the pocket, walked to the next sign-on-the-floor and then repeated the entire process. If Shakespeare were alive he would have increased his 'ages of man' from seven to eight.

Talking seemed pointless, so not many people (other than staff giving directions and confirming identities) bothered. Most were double-masked, making it difficult to talk anyway, and at our stage of life hearing can be difficult at the best of times.

For most it was the eyes that told the story: and the story was one of quiet, contained concern. Not quite sure what we were letting ourselves in for, let alone if we'd be the unlucky ones to experience the worst side-effects. But we were willing to run the risks because we wanted to be with our extended families and friends: not posing a threat to them, nor them to us.

We were all given a form with a list of boxes which needed to be ticked, mostly about known allergies and previous illnesses. Then off to a chair, followed by another chair and then another as we edged closer and closer to the side-room where we would be injected. The only noises were the chatter of staff, the swish of curtains, snatches of overheard conversations from behind the curtains and, every few minutes, a name being called and another person rising, straightening themselves, taking a deep breath and then disappearing behind the curtain.

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While I waited, someone passing seemed to recognise me, stood a few feet away and spoke. I couldn't make out a word that came from behind his mask so I assumed he was praising my genius as a columnist and rewarded him with a thumbs up. He just shrugged his shoulders, flapped his hand up and down and walked away. Hmmm.

Anyway, the jab (I had to go through the form again, just in case there were discrepancies in my previous answers) was the most painless I'd ever had. It's given into the muscle in your upper arm, so wear something which can be easily rolled up. After that you sit in another side room for 15 minutes, just in case there are any unexpected side-effects over and above the 13 listed on the information leaflet handed to you after the jab. Surprisingly, my only post-jab reaction was an overwhelming desire for a double bacon and cheese burger and a huge glass of Baileys. I say surprisingly, because I've never even considered that combination before.

The start to finish process took just under 50 minutes. It flew for me, but not, I suspect, for some carers and for those whose lift-homes were hanging around outside (so don't be taking young, easily bored children with you).

But, as I say, it flew for me because the staff were brilliant: efficient, patient, kind, reassuring, professional and wonderfully empathetic. They may have been doing this for hours every day, and for weeks on end, yet clearly understood that for the rest of us it was a novel, concerning and, dare I say it, slightly scary experience.

When it was over I felt better than I have for months and my only side effect was a 'heavy' arm for about 36 hours. It felt and still feels like a corner has been turned. I can't wait for the second 'jab'. And yes, I had my double bacon and cheese burger, but washed it down with a Fanta.

ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 12 1921

Plane Burned, Airman Missing

THE Ballinamina district of County Limerick, where an aeroplane which had made a forced descent on Thursday night was burned and one of the airmen kidnapped, was yesterday visited by a large number of Crown forces.

Yesterday morning, a number of tradesmen in nearby Kilmallock were warned by the police that unless the officer was returned within 36 hours, they would be held responsible. Whether the aeroplane was forced to descend from engine trouble or otherwise has not transpired and one report says the machine was fired on by a party of men and brought to the ground.

Shot Dead in Derry

MRS Annie F Plunkett of Atlantic Avenue, Belfast claimed £10,000 compensation at Derry Sessions in respect of the death of her husband, Patrick Plunkett, a commercial traveller and well-known cricketer who was shot in Derry on 22nd June last.

Mr Plunkett left his lodgings to purchase cigarettes. When passing along Bishop Street the firing was so heavy that a shopkeeper took him into his shop for refuge. Mr Plunkett insisted on leaving and he was shot dead. His body lay on the street for two nights. His Honour, in awarding £2,000 said they all sympathised very deeply with Mrs Plunkett and her four children.

Unionists Cry 'Gerrymander'

A FEW weeks ago the Local Government Board wrote to Enniskillen Rural Council (on which the Unionists have a narrow majority) intimating that the townlands in the Belleek rural district, now forming part of Ballyshannon (County Donegal) Union, will be transferred to Enniskillen Union.

A resolution by Unionist members of the Enniskillen Rural Council was passed, emphatically protesting against the proposal to amalgamate Belleek Rural Council with that council as 'unworkable and unjust'. Nationalists contend that the reason for the Unionist opposition to the order was because the amalgamation would result in the Unionists losing control.

Babies' Bodies Found

THE body of a newly-born child was found in a cardboard box at Belfast City Cemetery. Meanwhile, a Belfast dealer, walking on the foreshore at Holywood, came across a parcel, washed in by the tide. It contained the body of a newly-born baby. **Patrick Plunkett was an innocent victim of Derry's brief but savage 'civil war'. Meanwhile Fermanagh unionists were irked that the unforeseen effects of partition might cost them political control of Enniskillen. Such a dire fate was averted thanks to a pro-unionist gerrymander under the new Belfast government in 1922.**

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com