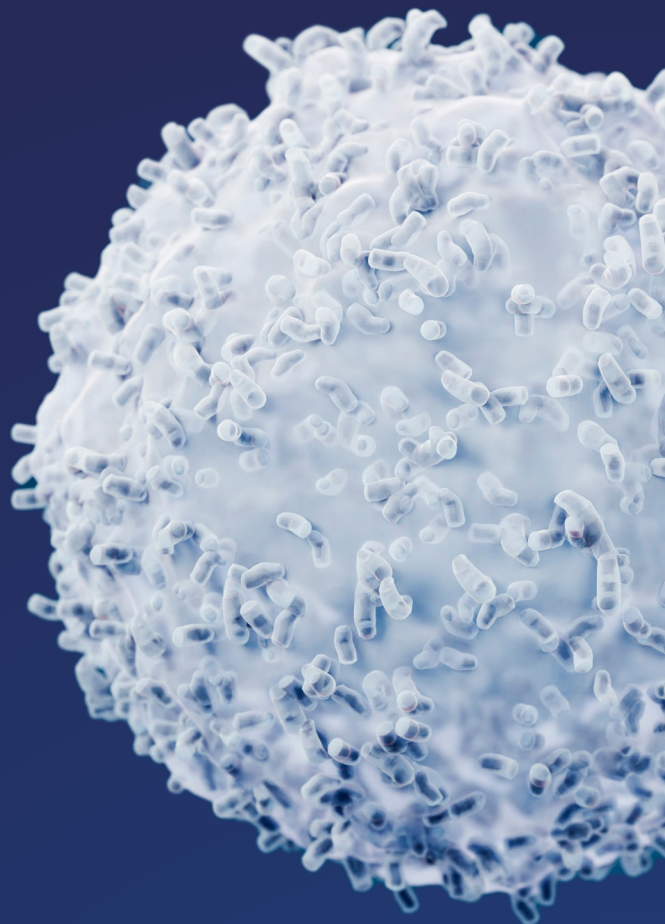




The Royal College of Pathologists
Pathology: the science behind the cure

Clinical immunology workforce

Briefing | UK



Clinical immunologists are vital in the diagnosis and treatment of deficiency and allergic conditions, as well as cancer, HIV, rheumatological conditions and other autoimmune disorders. Without them, patients would face an increased burden from their condition, and many would likely suffer earlier mortality.

The intelligence gathered from the College's workforce data collection highlights growing concerns for the immunology workforce and the fragility of the immunology services across the UK. Workload in immunology is only increasing by 11% each year, but the workforce is increasing at a rate between 0 and 2% per year. Long-term vacancies and increasing demands are leaving services vulnerable and at risk of collapse.

Impact on patients

The shortage of consultant immunologists is leaving patients without timely access to care, often facing long waits for diagnosis, treatment and ongoing management of their complex immune conditions.

In areas where services are fragile or rely on a single consultant, care is disrupted or entirely unavailable, forcing patients to seek support from neighbouring regions or go without a specialist altogether. Many patients are waiting months to see an immunologist. These delays and gaps have real consequences for patients' health, many of whom are immunocompromised or frightened of their allergies, causing them emotional distress, worsening conditions, and in some cases preventable harm or death.

Key findings



76% of services said they do not have enough staff to meet clinical demand right now.



The UK currently needs at least 44% more (52 posts) immunology consultants in post in order to meet current demand.

39%

39% of all immunology services have one or more current consultant vacancies.



53% of all vacancies have been vacant for 1 year or more, which highlights the national shortage of qualified candidates available to apply.



A quarter of services currently only have one consultant immunologist in post, leaving them highly vulnerable to collapse and placing immense pressure on the sole consultant.



Immunologists are seeing their workloads increase by 11% every year, without commensurate increase in workforce capacity.

21%

21% of the consultant workforce will retire in the next 5 years; 40% will retire in the next 10 years.

Additionally, 40% of services have only two consultants in post, further highlighting the fragility and understaffing across the system.

50%

50% of our immunologist members do not feel heard or empowered in their roles by their employer, and 45% do not feel supported.

College recommendations

Urgent action is needed to address the challenges facing immunology. The specialty needs investment, time and support to enable services to enact reforms and contingencies where possible to safeguard the essential work immunologists deliver for patients. The College is calling on the following recommendations.

Train



- ✓ Establish 17 additional immunology training posts by 2027 to cover current vacancies and a further 35 by 2030 to meet workforce demand. The latter would need to be coupled with the appropriate increase in consultant posts.
- ✓ Employers should provide stronger safeguards for education and training within medical consultant immunologists job plans. These safeguards must be honoured in practice.

Retain



- ✓ Employers should provide more administrative resources to enable more cost-effective use of immunologists' time and enable them to focus on their clinical duties.
- ✓ Employers should ensure the quality of the facilities provided are sufficient to enable immunologists to deliver timely and optimal care.
- ✓ Employers should provide greater protection for professional development time, both in formal job plans and in practice.
- ✓ Employers should provide greater flexibility in job plans for immunologists to participate in the development of their profession.
- ✓ Employers should invest in research to establish how immunologists would feel better heard, trusted and valued by their organisation.
- ✓ Employers should deliver on the recommendations relating to wellbeing in the 'Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England'. This includes creating a better working environment for NHS staff and supporting their career development.

Reform



- ✓ Proper workforce planning should be undertaken to ensure appropriate numbers of medical consultant immunologists are in post in each service, enabling safe and effective patient care. This should take account of the findings of this report; that at least one trained consultant immunologist is required per 451,000 population.
- ✓ NHS England's planned 2024 workforce distribution review should be reconsidered by the DHSC. Redistribution is an important step in addressing current imbalances perhaps in the short term, but it cannot on its own resolve systemic workforce challenges. Without a substantial increase in the overall workforce, redistribution risks shifting shortages between services rather than alleviating them. For immunology, sustainable improvement will require not only redistribution, but also a prioritised expansion of consultant and resident posts.
- ✓ Expansion in consultant posts must be accompanied by adequate investment in roles across immunology teams, including healthcare scientists and specialist nurses.
- ✓ Stronger NHS data coding should be developed to understand the true extent of immunology workload across clinical and diagnostic services, including waiting times.



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