

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor y Blynyddoedd Cynnar, Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee

Blaenoriaethau Pwyllgor y Blynyddoedd Cynnar, Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Priorities for the Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymateb gan Coleg Brenhinol y Patholegwyr | Evidence from Royal College of Pathologists,

What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Seventh Senedd, and why?

The key issue that the Royal College of Pathologists would like to draw to the Committee's attention is the crisis in paediatric and perinatal pathology (PPP) services in Wales. Paediatric and perinatal pathologists (PPPs) focus on the study of diseases and infections in fetuses, infants and children up to the age of 18 years. The PPP workforce is one of the UK's smallest medical specialties.

Paediatric and perinatal pathologists play a key role in the diagnosis and treatment of a wide range of diseases in infants and children, including childhood cancer and inherited conditions. They also undertake post-mortem examinations in fetuses, infants and children who have died. This challenging but important work involves assisting families, coroners, and clinical medical teams in understanding the cause of the child's death. In addition, post-mortem and placental examinations may assist in identifying and managing risks in future pregnancies and play an important role in the audit and continuing improvement of clinical services including obstetrics, midwifery, paediatrics, pre-hospital care, and emergency medicine.

The PPP workforce in Wales, just like across the UK, faces severe staff shortages which prevent consultants from meeting service demands. PPP services in Wales are currently provided by a single consultant with very limited options for cover of the service during annual leave and sickness until a newly appointed consultant begins working at the end of the year. Meanwhile, pathologists in Wales are also covering workload from South West England, where there are currently no PPP consultants in post. This need to cover cases from the South West is adding significantly to workloads and is impacting their ability to provide timely services to families in Wales.

This causes unacceptable delays for families awaiting test results and those seeking an understanding of the cause of their child's death. Anecdotal evidence and case studies indicate that there is a huge backlog of cases or reports that are severely delayed in being processed because of the chronic workforce shortage, and a major increase in waiting times for post-mortem examination reports of babies and children. A recent report in Wales found one family had been waiting for 14 months and they had still not received a report from a post-mortem examination. It is now common for families to wait 12 months or more for the final results of a Coroner's post mortem examination.

An urgent, long-overdue workforce strategy, including appropriate funding, is needed to resolve this worsening situation. Trainees for this specialty across the UK are needed to replace retirements of existing consultants, which is leading to further gaps in the workforce. However, these consultants have only limited time and capacity to train trainees, and only one trainee can currently be supported in Wales. This is a crucial gap that needs urgent attention - the situation cannot improve if the paediatric and perinatal pathology consultants of the future cannot be trained effectively.

In addition to consultant and trainee workforce, an effective paediatric and perinatal pathology service cannot function without the hard work of a range of laboratory and mortuary staff, and appropriate facilities in which to work. This includes appropriate admin support, anatomical pathology technicians and postmortem logistics staff. This is required to deliver the service that patients and relatives expect. It is equally important that shortages of appropriately trained staff in these roles, and ageing facilities and infrastructure, are also addressed.

We urge the Committee to work cross-party across the Senedd, particularly with the Health and Social Care Committee, to ensure that paediatric pathology workforce shortages and infrastructure in Wales are addressed, for the benefit of the families of children and young people who have died.