



Forensic pathology workforce

Briefing | UK

For the first time, the intelligence gathered from the College's workforce data has provided a comprehensive analysis of the forensic pathology workforce. This reports:

- no growth in the UK forensic pathology workforce over nearly 10 years despite reported increased complexity of caseloads.
- concern as to whether the current workforce and training pipeline is sufficient to meet demand – requiring an additional 6 new training posts by 2031 across the UK.
- need for all governments to revisit and complete analysis of previous fundamental reviews of forensic pathology, in collaboration with key stakeholders including the College.

Challenges vary throughout the UK, but collective action is needed to determine service, employment and training models that can assist the forensic pathology workforce in meeting demand.

**Despite repeated calls for reform,
little action has been taken.**

What do forensic pathologists do?

Forensic pathologists focus on the investigation of deaths that are sudden, unexpected or suspicious,

including homicide. They specialise in performing post-mortem examinations for medical and legal purposes, to understand the cause and manner of death. They are also sometimes called on to interpret the injuries of live victims to assist criminal cases. They may follow a case from a crime scene and provide expert opinions to coroners (procurators fiscal in Scotland), police and courts, often giving evidence in trials.

Effect on bereaved families

Bereaved families experience a service that is fragmented, disjointed and inconsistent in its standards and delivery. Inadequate staffing and increasing demand – as well as inadequate facilities, e.g. mortuaries – are causing families to wait months for post-mortem results and slowing down legal investigations. Many consultants reporting work beyond contracted hours, and they can still not meet demand.

Delays in reporting are frequently driven by dependencies on other specialist services that are critical for complex cases, including toxicology, neuropathology, and paediatric and perinatal pathology, which are themselves facing workforce shortages.

Key findings

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There are 7 vacant forensic pathology posts in the UK, 5 of which are in Scotland and 1 in each of England and Northern Ireland.



There are 39 (39.1 WTE) filled posts in England and Wales, 17 (19.2 WTE) in Scotland and 5 (4 WTE) in Northern Ireland.

30%

30% of the consultant forensic pathology workforce are expected to retire within the next 10 years. 10 resident doctors are currently in approved forensic pathology training.



44% of forensic pathologists in England, 67% in Wales, 90% in Scotland and 100% in Northern Ireland believe that current staffing levels are inadequate.



Forensic pathologists report growing workload driven by increasing complexity and demand, leading to longer waits for families and delays to legal investigations.



It is estimated that there is a need for 16 additional consultant forensic pathology posts across the UK to meet current demand.



College recommendations

The future of a high-quality and sustainable service for families is dependent on investment in the forensic pathology workforce. This requires coordinated action from multiple bodies across the UK including the Home Office and Ministry of Justice (England and Wales), Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (Scotland), Department of Justice (Northern Ireland), coronial services, NHS workforce and training bodies, and professional and regulatory organisations.

Train



- ✓ A phased expansion of an additional 23 training posts over the next 10 years across the UK to help fill current vacancies, replace impending retirements, help ensure succession planning, and provide a safe and effective service. 6 of these new posts should be established in the next 5 years. This should be supported by an equivalent increase in the number of histopathology residents entering integrated cellular pathology training at ST1.
- ✓ As a priority, the Home Office in England and Wales should reinstate the number of forensic pathology trainees to 8, in line with the recommendation of the Independent Review into Forensic Pathology (2024) as part of this required expansion.
- ✓ Workforce planning and reform should ensure that those completing training are able to secure employment. Funded time must also be allocated to existing consultants to allow for time to train these additional trainees.
- ✓ Governments and deaneries – together with the College – should investigate ways that training posts can be supported in services where there is currently no training provision (e.g. south of England). This includes considering how posts could be integrated within the independent sector (e.g. private group practice) in England and Wales, and flexible approaches to enable training outside of the limited number of currently approved training centres – with support to trainers considering this as an option.
- ✓ Initiatives are needed to encourage resident doctors in forensic pathology training to stay in regions where they train – particularly in Scotland and Northern Ireland where there are existing consultant vacancies. This will help ensure that there is an equitably distributed and resourced forensic pathology workforce throughout the UK.
- ✓ Continue the ongoing process of curriculum review for forensic pathology to improve and maintain the highest standards of workforce development.

- ✓ Increase focus on forensic pathology in undergraduate teaching to improve understanding of it as a specialty. Align this with other undergraduate learning goals, such as accurate reporting of injuries and the importance of post-mortem examination. Promote learning through the Pathology Portal or other learning platforms.

- ✓ Implement a formal government-funded fellowship training programme for histopathologists who wish to retrain in forensic pathology. This should consider the impact of removing histopathologists from the consultant workforce and the ability of the current forensic pathology workforce to deliver training to both resident doctors and these fellowship posts.

Retain



- ✓ Increased workforce support, with dedicated administrative support and adequate mortuary staffing. This includes greater flexibility in access to mortuary facilities so that this can be better managed in conjunction with other diary commitments such as court attendance and inquests.
- ✓ Address issues impacting retention including employment models, workload and financial security, with a focus on systemic reform.

- ✓ Dedicated protected time for professional development to enable forensic consultants to have time to train the next generation and support their own personal development.

Reform



- ✓ Governments to revisit and complete analysis of previous fundamental reviews of the structure of the profession of forensic pathology, in collaboration with key stakeholders including the College. This will help to determine service, employment and training models across the UK that can assist the forensic pathology workforce in meeting demand and addressing challenges within the system.
- ✓ Establishment of locally organised specialised centres of excellence where post mortems would be carried out, and the introduction of national death investigation services to provide consistent and high-quality services, allowing bereaved people to receive a quality service no matter where they live.
- ✓ Investment in dedicated forensic pathology facilities, including mortuary facilities.
- ✓ Investment in and implementation of new technology such as post-mortem CT – to be implemented only where appropriate and in line with governance and leadership from forensic pathologists.
- ✓ Encourage more appropriate and realistic time frames for reports required by courts, coroners and procurators fiscal.
- ✓ Investigate ways to increase the number of histopathologists undertaking post mortems – such as via the Certificate in Higher Autopsy Training (CHAT) – thus removing some of the pressures on the forensic pathology workforce.
- ✓ Improved centralised systems for data collection to assist with workforce planning in each nation.

Contingency



- ✓ Encourage continued mutual aid and networking between forensic pathology services as effective ways of managing excess workload, as long as this is supported by concurrent efforts to increase the workforce more broadly.
- ✓ Improve education of and engagement with primary care services and death management teams to help ensure that cases that are non-suspicious and do not require forensic investigation are not referred inappropriately to the forensic system.



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