



Briefing: in relation to pathology workforce concerns in Scotland

25 March 2019

Background

Our recent census, *Meeting pathology demand*, focused on the histopathology workforce – the specialty vital to cancer management from initial diagnosis to guiding patients' treatment. Safe and effective care is dependent on having the right number of staff in the right places. Demand for pathology services has grown significantly in recent years and continues to grow. The pathology workforce has not increased in line with this demand and is predicted to reduce to levels that may put clinical services in jeopardy.

Key findings from the report

- While Scotland overall has a younger workforce profile than other parts of the UK, it is essential that we continue to have enough trainees in Scotland to maintain this. Assuming all staff aged over 55 retire in the next 5 years, only 78% of the workforce in Scotland would be in place and this will continue to decrease.
- A third of histopathology departments across Scotland are outsourcing work to meet demand.
- More remote areas in Scotland struggle to recruit and retain appropriate numbers of staff.
- 68% of the hospitals in Scotland that use locums do so because of insufficient applicants for vacancies.
- The census also found that, across the UK, only 3% of NHS histopathology departments have enough staff to meet clinical demand with hospitals increasingly hiring locums to cover staff shortages.

Effects on services

The College hosts regional councils, comprising specialty members, for the Devolved Nations that provide professional leadership in their country and contribute at a national level to the maintenance and development of pathology services and the quality of care that patients receive. Professor Peter Johnston, Chair, Scotland Regional Council said:

“Staffing in Scottish histopathology departments is vulnerable with unfilled consultant posts. Expectations of provision are growing but despite initiatives, current workforce expansion does not meet this demand. Outsourcing and locum cover are expensive and unsustainable solutions.”

According to Cancer Research UK, every year around 31,900 people in Scotland are diagnosed with cancer – around 87 people every day. Cancer death rates in Scotland have fallen by a fifth over the last twenty years, yet there is more progress to be made.

The faecal immunochemical test (FIT) replaced the guaiac faecal occult blood test (gFOBt) as the test used in the Scottish Bowel Screening Programme in November 2017. The College welcomes higher uptake in testing and the benefits for earlier diagnosis; however, it will increase pathology demand, both as a result of increased initial testing and because positive results lead to further testing.

Professor Jo Martin, President of the Royal College of Pathologists, commented:

“The cost of staff shortages across histopathology departments is high for both patients and our health services. For patients, it means worrying delays in diagnosis and treatment.”

A range of solutions

Ensuring pathology services can cope with current and future demand is vital to improve outcomes for patients. The Royal College of Pathologists is proposing a range of solutions to address the shortage of histopathologists in the short and longer term, including:

- support for the Scottish National Laboratories Programme which highlights the value of laboratory services to patients and their journeys, noting the positive influence of investment in diagnosis when it comes to managing each person’s clinical condition
- thinking strategically, collaboratively and holistically about workforce
- on-going investment in education, training, research and quality improvement should be provided to secure a sustainable diagnostics workforce
- the current Managed Diagnostic Networks (MDNs) should be supported by all NHS Boards to ensure the MDNs can continue their work in extending networking, interprofessional working, sharing of good practice and quality improvement across the diagnostic specialties.
- better IT for day-to-day work
- thinking about the use of digital pathology to enable staff to work more efficiently and flexibly and to develop an educational tool that has potential use in all the professions in the workforce
- development of administrative and clerical staff, band 2-4 support staff, biomedical scientists, clinical scientists, advanced clinical practitioners and medically qualified doctors to work collaboratively in flexible configurations to deliver high quality diagnostics as near to the patient as possible.



Workforce case study

Andrew has been a consultant histopathologist for more than two decades and works at a large teaching hospital in Scotland

“The real challenge we face is a mismatch of workforce with workload. There are huge expectations placed upon us to facilitate accurate and timely diagnosis of disease, while new standards and guidelines all require more work.

Studies have shown that the amount of information we are asked to provide on malignant disease doubled in the ten years from 1991 to 2001, and then doubled again in the next decade. Meanwhile the workforce has expanded slowly – by less than 1 per cent for consultants. We are struggling in the face of this to do the job.

For me, it's important to be able to deliver the highest quality of service locally, so patients don't have to travel a long way for regular treatment when they're already facing considerable burdens. In my hospital, we know from our workload we are around four or five consultants short; six more would make it comfortable. But we need extra administrative support too, alongside the scientific staff who run the laboratory, and the development work that is needed to bring the service forward. All of this needs investment. We need more people doing every aspect of the job.

But at the moment, we're starved of resources. Services are ignored until they become a bottle neck, patient pathways are obstructed and it becomes a crisis. There is an impact on the quality of the service and the time it takes to deliver. On a personal level, it's hard for me to take a holiday and I have to put a lot of arrangements in place. I work silly hours and that's not sustainable, either for me or the department. I could retire, but I'm working full-time because what I do is worthwhile and I love my job greatly.”



Contact details

This briefing was authored by Janine Aldridge, Public Affairs Officer.

E: janine.aldrige@rcpath.org

T: 020 7451 6769

About the Royal College of Pathologists

The Royal College of Pathologists is a professional membership organisation with more than 11,000 fellows, affiliates and trainees, of which 23% are based outside of the UK. We are committed to setting and maintaining professional standards and promoting excellence in the teaching and practice of pathology, for the benefit of patients.

Our members include medically and veterinary qualified pathologists and clinical scientists in 17 different specialties, including cellular pathology, haematology, clinical biochemistry, medical microbiology and veterinary pathology.

The College works with pathologists at every stage of their career. We set curricula, organise training and run exams, publish clinical guidelines and best practice recommendations and provide continuing professional development. We engage a wide range of stakeholders to improve awareness and understanding of pathology and the vital role it plays in everybody's healthcare. Working with members, we run programmes to inspire the next generation to study science and join the profession.

