



The Royal College of Pathologists

Pathology: the science behind the cure

The Royal College of Pathologists' Priorities for Laboratory Services in Scotland. 2021 Scottish Parliament Elections

March 2021

In May the people of Scotland will elect their representatives to the Scottish parliament. A new government will take responsibility for a range of devolved areas, including health services.

Laboratory services in Scotland involve the work of a huge array of doctors and scientists who play a vital role in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness, with the majority of healthcare interactions involving lab tests in some way. Laboratory professionals undertake research, advancing medicine and devising new treatments, and have been crucial in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Laboratory services support patients throughout their entire life. Without lab tests we cannot understand what is making a patient unwell. In this priorities document we look at the key challenges facing laboratory services and call on the new executive to address these areas.

The College hosts regional councils, comprising specialty members, for the devolved nations. These councils provide professional leadership in their country and contribute at a national level to the maintenance and development of laboratory services and the quality of care that patients receive.

Dr Bernie Croal, Chair of the Scotland Regional Council, said:

'The COVID-19 pandemic has once again highlighted the importance of laboratory tests and laboratory professionals within the healthcare landscape. As we emerge from the pandemic, it is vital that such services are reinforced and supported to optimise healthcare recovery both for COVID-19 related illness and for the inevitable huge healthcare backlog created as a result of the

pandemic. Ensuring we have appropriate staff, equipment and IT support to underpin laboratory services is vital.'

Learning from the pandemic

- The pandemic has underlined the importance of having well-connected and collaborative networks delivering laboratory services across Scotland, underpinned by a distributed services model. The laboratory diagnostic networks were primed to react when the pandemic hit and rapidly developed a potent, nationally coordinated service for COVID-19 testing and surveillance studies.
- Data collection by the existing National Demand Optimisation Group (NDOG) for laboratory services was able to switch its attention towards monitoring the impact of the pandemic on non-COVID-19 testing. Such observations serve as surrogate metrics for healthcare pathways such as cancer diagnosis and chronic disease monitoring.
- NDOG data and the development of an associated interactive dashboard for histopathology allows trends in cancer diagnosis to be observed. Significant under-diagnosis of cancer in particular can be determined for each health board during the pandemic period and into the recovery phase, allowing targeted recovery plans to be prioritised.
- NDOG data has also allowed chronic disease monitoring to be facilitated. For example, huge reductions in diabetes diagnosis and monitoring can similarly be identified for each health board area and targeted appropriately.
- The NHS Scotland laboratory workforce, like many parts of the NHS, exhibits significant shortfalls in the number of existing staff positions, but is also limited in its ability to fill such posts – especially in remote and rural locations. The aging population with the associated increase in chronic disease monitoring and incidence of cancer will put considerable pressure on many services, especially during the post-pandemic recovery phase with catch-up further adding to the burden, especially for histopathology workload.
- Much of what we have been used to doing across the NHS has radically changed during the pandemic. Within laboratory services, the huge focus on delivering new COVID-19 testing and surveillance services from scratch has been a huge effort. Likewise, many other staff have shifted focus to support redeployment to patient front lines and develop vaccination services. Many laboratory staff are demoralised, suffering from burnout and working in stressful environments with high expectations. Training has also been significantly affected during the pandemic, but we now need an ongoing commitment to ensure robust training is resumed and enhanced to adequately grow the workforce to meet the needs of our population.

The College's call for the next government:

- Recognise the importance of laboratory services in driving healthcare and ensure adequate investment in staff, equipment and IT support is made, recognising the predicted increased impact of recovery catch-up workflows on services, notably histopathology.



- Remobilisation and recovery of services will likely require targeted additional funding to specific services. It is vital that such funding envelopes also incorporate additional support to laboratory services. All healthcare business cases must include laboratory support.
- Given the importance of growing our laboratory workforce, it is vital that robust training is resumed and protected across all laboratory professional groups.
- Commitment to continue to support laboratory networks, the distributed model for service delivery and important groups such as the National Demand Optimisation Group, whose business intelligence data will be vital in directing prioritisation during remobilisation and ensuring appropriate use of lab tests going forwards.

Investing in workforce for patients

- The Staffing levels in Scottish Laboratories, see [Scotland's Future Laboratory Workforce Report, November 2019](#)¹, have already been raised as a concern – there were already too few staff to deliver services at pre-COVID-19 levels and there are concerns about the demographics of the aging workforce across all specialties and staff groups. There is no slack in the system to cope with situations such as COVID-19, nor the expected increased demand during the post-pandemic catch-up phase.
- Safe and effective high-quality patient care relies on the right number of skilled healthcare staff in the right places. Laboratory staffing numbers have not risen in line with demand and pathology services are unable to recruit to many existing vacant posts, especially in remote and rural locations.
- A significant shortfall in the number of histopathologists is predicted across the UK, given the increased demand for histopathology services and the emerging shortfall in training numbers to match this. This will significantly impact diagnostic processes, especially cancer services.
- The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted pre-existing problems facing remote and rural laboratory services in Scotland, notably within the Island health boards and NHS Highland. Such services operate on a knife edge, held up by locum appointments, with the related hospital and community services equally at risk.

The College's call for the next government:

- Workforce intelligence and planning is vital to ensure the current and future laboratory workforce is matched to the needs of our healthcare systems. Existing systems and investment needs significant re-focus so as to repair existing and avoid future staffing gaps.
- The College calls for increased investment in remote and rural services, including enabling and funding the use of shared oversight by the larger health boards. More flexible approaches to recruitment, including enhanced rates of pay, need to be considered in order to be able to compete in a UK/international market.
- Since the launch of our [histopathology workforce report](#)², a pay premium has been introduced for new histopathology trainees in England. We are now calling for the recruitment and



retention premium to be extended to all, including specialist histopathology trainees in areas in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

IT and infrastructure for better patient care

- Laboratory services depend heavily on modern IT systems for sample collection/tracking, analysis and reporting results. Many laboratory IT systems are over 25 years old and a complete lack of interoperability between the boards means results cannot be electronically shared, transferred or even collected for business intelligence or surveillance purposes.
- Urgent investment in laboratory IT infrastructure is desperately needed so that the important value that lab results have within healthcare can be optimised.
- Digital pathology – the collection, management, sharing and interpretation of pathology information in a digital environment – will improve patient care, and support the pathology workforce by making the diagnosis and monitoring of disease much more efficient. It will bring faster and easier access to expert opinion and advice, with the rapid referral of cases between the health boards and wider UK organisations.

The College's call for the next government:

- Significant capital investment is needed to support the implementation of the ongoing national laboratory IT system (LIMS) procurement/roll-out. This much-needed NHS IT infrastructure and practical IT support will help ensure reliable, efficient and safe systems, and ensure software systems are fit for the future and consistent across the country.
- Investment and rapid roll-out of Digital Pathology is required. The predicted huge shortfall in pathologist capacity can in part be mitigated by facilitation of quicker more efficient sharing of work across the health boards.
- The pandemic has seen the NHS adapt and use technology at speed. We need to ensure we don't lose the benefits from this adoption by embedding videoconferencing as the norm for conducting meetings, consultations and follow-up.

Staff Wellbeing

- A well workforce working in a caring and supportive environment is a more efficient, cohesive, safer workforce and is better able to serve the needs of patients.
- The impact of the pandemic has been hard on laboratory staff, given the huge effort to deliver rapid implementation of COVID-19 related testing. Many have not taken annual leave, many have been redeployed to frontline care and many others will have also had to deal with family pressures of the pandemic like everyone else.
- Trainees, in particular, have suffered – reduced training opportunities, redeployment and professional exam disruption.



The College's call for the next government:

- Ensure a maintained focus on the day-to-day and longer-term wellbeing of all staff.
- Commit at every level to building a new culture to help build sustainability and resilience. This will prioritise the physical and psychological safety of staff as core values within the NHS to build loyalty, productivity and retention.
- Provide additional support to trainees to ensure they can re-start their training and provide a much-needed complement to the future consultant workforce.
- Support the older workforce to enable an ongoing contribution to the NHS in the later stages of their career – such individuals will be a vital resource in the coming years.

References

1. The Diagnostic Steering Group. *Scotland's Future Laboratory Workforce*, 2019.
2. The Royal College of Pathologists. *Meeting Pathology Demand, Histopathology workforce census*, 2018.

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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. 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.

