Background

This policy briefing from the Royal College of Pathologists looks at the workforce challenges facing the pathology specialties involved in cancer services in Northern Ireland.

Pathologists are at the heart of cancer screening, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring. Pathology is the service that handles the cells and tissues removed from suspicious ‘lumps and bumps’, identifies the nature of the abnormality and, if malignant, provides evidence to the clinician on the type of cancer, its grade and, for some cancers, its responsiveness to certain treatments.

The Royal College of Pathologists is pleased that cancer patients in Northern Ireland will have the same access to drugs currently being offered to patients in the rest of the UK having faced two years of inequitable access to cancer medicines.

Pathology specialties involved in cancer diagnostics

- Histopathology is the diagnosis and study of diseases of tissue, and involves examining tissue and/or cells under a microscope. Histopathologists are responsible for making tissue diagnoses and helping clinicians manage a patient’s care. Histopathologists have key responsibilities for cancer screening, at the moment for breast, bowel and cervical cancer, with other programmes expected in the near future.

- Haematologists are doctors who are experts in blood, including cells already circulating in the blood and those being made in the cell factories of the bone marrow. Haematologists study blood disorders, including blood cancers and diagnose and treat these cancers.
• Blood transfusion is an important responsibility of haematologists. Some have expertise in blood and marrow stem cell transplantation to treat a range of life-threatening malignant and non-malignant disorders.

• Cytopathology is the study of cells in body fluids, smears and tissue samples, for example the study of cervical smears for the detection of changes in the cervix that could lead to cancer.

Key messages

• Capital funding is essential and it should be focused on modernisation and optimisation of services in Northern Ireland. For example, the pathology modernisation alongside molecular pathology digital imaging for pathology is under-resourced and is behind the rest of the UK.

• Proposals to establish a Northern Ireland-wide IT system for pathology services, including digital pathology, are well underway, with business cases being developed and IT systems designed. The College would like this procurement programme to proceed at pace as it will bring numerous patient benefits and improve pathology services for patients in Northern Ireland e.g. by making patients’ test results more accessible, and improving access to expert advice and opinion on diagnoses.

• The College calls for increased investment in pathology services, particularly in the recruitment and training of pathologists and scientists.

• The College recommends more investment in laboratory staff in Northern Ireland, who are under-resourced and under-valued, to enable more effective diagnosis and monitoring. Too much funding is wasted by inappropriate testing or send-away testing due to geographic restraints.

Effects on service

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 pathology services and the quality of care that patients receive. Professor Ken Mills, Chair, Northern Ireland Regional Council said:

‘Pathology services are critical to prompt and accurate diagnosis of patients with cancer and other diseases. It is essential that the cancer review recognises the impact that pathologists and clinical scientists make and invests in their expertise and technologies.’

According to Cancer Research UK, more than 25 people are diagnosed in Northern Ireland with cancer every single day – that’s over 9,250 per year. And while survival rates have increased over the last 50 years, Northern Ireland still ranks below other European countries.
The pathology workforce

Our recent histopathology workforce census Meeting pathology demand highlights the intense pressures that histopathologists face from increased workloads, such as new NHS screening programmes. Key findings include:

- 67% of work in Northern Ireland was outsourced to meet demand. The use of locums was 100% due to insufficient applicants for vacancies.
- £27m is spent per year across the NHS in the UK on locums and outsourcing services.
- While Northern Ireland overall has a younger workforce profile than other parts of the UK, it is essential that we continue to have enough trainees to maintain the workforce. Assuming all staff aged over 55 retire in the next 5 years, only 86% of the current workforce in Northern Ireland would be in place and this will continue to decrease.
- 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.
- This has become so severe that some populations, such as those in Belfast, have no access to specialist paediatric histopathology services in their region.

Pathology workforce challenges:

- There is a growing demand for pathology services, both in the number and complexity of tests performed, caused by developments in testing such as the introduction of the faecal immunochemical test (FIT), the new Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) test and new targeted therapies needing genetic or molecular tests on samples.
- With a predicted 28% shortfall in staff by 2021 we are trying to get as much help as possible to prevent harm from diagnostic delays.
- Staffing levels have not risen in line with demand. Pathology services are unable to recruit to vacant posts - it can take up to 15 years to train a pathologist.
- Pathology departments have already undertaken a vast amount of work to meet increased demand (without additional investment) while maintaining quality. Pathologists’ contribution to key activities such as research and education is being sacrificed to meet increased service demands.

The College will:

- Continue to work closely with the Institute for Biomedical Science (IBMS) to support biomedical scientist (BMS) reporting, administering examinations and awarding of qualifications.
- Continue to support the National Cancer Research Institute Cellular Molecular Pathology (CM-Path) initiative, particularly in developing the skills and capacity to grow academic molecular pathology.
• Continue to increase the molecular pathology component of training curricula to ensure that the specialists of the future are equipped with the skills they need.

• Continue to push for greater IT investment to support patient care and safety. 30% of Laboratory Information Management Systems (LIMS) are over 30 years old. These are vital to effectively manage samples, and associated data, and automate workflows.

Further information

Our On the agenda website pages outline the College’s position on topical subject areas in pathology such as the pathology workforce and cancer diagnostics.

Find out more about the different areas of pathology on the College What is pathology website page.

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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, 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.