



Briefing: The pathology workforce in Wales

26 June 2019

Background

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

Pathologists are at the heart of cancer screening, diagnosis, monitoring and treatment. Pathology is the service that 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.

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.

- Microbiologists, virologists, clinical biochemists, geneticists and immunologists all support cancer patients through their treatment, and specialist histopathology also is carried out by paediatric pathologists (tumours of children) and neuropathologist (brain tumours)

Key messages

- We welcome the government's ambitious commitment to earlier cancer diagnosis which leads to better outcomes for patients. Achieving earlier cancer diagnosis, relies on the right number of skilled health staff in the right places.
- The College calls for increased investment in pathology services, particularly in the recruitment and training of pathologists and scientists.

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:

- 36% of the consultant workforce in Wales is over the age of 55. Assuming all staff aged 55 or more retire in the next five years, just 64 per cent of the current workforce would be in place in Wales.
- In Wales, 10% of histopathology staff are 'retired and returned'. This is twice the level of the UK average.
- 17% of consultant pathologists in Wales are locums.
- Just 3% of services across the UK reported that they had enough staff to meet clinical demand. In Wales, all histopathology departments have vacancies.
- Over three-quarters of departments in the UK reported vacancies for consultants. This is especially worrying as these are the doctors who the most experienced and who support, train and manage trainees.
- This has become so severe that some populations, such as those in Belfast, have no access to specialist paediatric histopathology services in their region.

According to Cancer Research UK, every year around 19,100 people in Wales are diagnosed with cancer – around 52 people every day. Cancer survival in Wales is improving, with 54% of patients surviving for five years or more and research has been at the heart of this progress. Yet there is more progress to be made - one in two people in the UK will be diagnosed with some form of cancer during their lifetime.

Cancer Research UK's report [Testing Times to come? An evaluation of pathology capacity across the UK, November 2016](#) highlighted that, year on year, the amount of histopathology requests to laboratories has increased by around 4.5% on average.



- In 2016, only 50.4% of junior doctors successfully completing foundation training progressed into specialty training (down from nearly 72% in 2011). Of those who do go into specialist training, pathology is competing with other disciplines for trainees. In 2018, for example, our training post fill rate in Wales was just 33%. Haematologists, pathologists who help diagnose and treat blood cancers and other blood disorders, are also in short supply.

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.
- The lowering of the screening age for bowel cancer, using FIT, to 50 will produce (a) more samples in biochemistry; (b) more positive results that (c) need endoscopy and (d) need an endoscopy biopsy reported. Apart from (c) all increase pathology demand.
- 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. The implementation of the Single Cancer Pathway and National Optimal Cancer Pathways will impact on reporting times.
- 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.
- It is anticipated that a third of consultant histopathologists will retire in the next five years. And there are not enough trainee doctors in post to fill this gap.
- 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:

- Press for digital pathology implementation to allow for more flexibility in recruitment and working
- 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 and connectivity 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.



Workforce case study

Rachel is a consultant histopathologist employed by a large health board in Wales

'In my department we should have 8.5 consultants and we have 4.5. That's been the case for around two years. It's a constant strain on the team and affects everything we do. It's not about cost-cutting, but a lack of applicants. Across the country, we're competing for a small pool of histopathologists.

Of course, work always comes in and we have to find ways to make sure we can do it, with greatly reduced numbers of consultants. We rely on locums and that brings its own challenges, impacting on the substantive members of staff. Locums are employed on short-term contracts for a few months at a time. This means they change from time to time and we don't have stability. They also don't participate in the full range of duties and their role within the team is quite different. It's extremely expensive to employ people in this way.

For us, rising demand is not so much about the number of samples we receive, but the complexity. What is required from the histopathologist has changed over the last few years and now it takes a lot more time, stretching the team even further. These are entirely appropriate demands that provide valuable pieces of information that help patient care, so it's entirely right that we're doing it.

At the moment, I feel development and innovation falls by the wayside because we have to focus on doing the day job. There are lots of exciting things we would love to do, but there's no time. If we had more staff, it would take a lot of stresses out of the system and there would be energy to develop and improve the service.

There is no overnight easy solution. We need a long-term strategy that encourages people into medicine, and particularly histopathology, from a very young age. We also need to give medical students the opportunity to find out more about histopathology. We need to get in there early, raising the profile of what we do and making it visible – if you don't know about histopathology, you won't think about it as a possible career.'

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.

