



The APPG for Radiotherapy

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

10th September 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

Catching up with cancer and addressing the cancer backlog

As Chairs of the Cancer All-Party Parliamentary Groups, we are writing to request an urgent meeting following concerns that the frightening scale of the true cancer backlog requires more urgent action than is currently being deployed.

On Tuesday 1st September you answered a question posed by Chris Bryant MP suggesting that the NHS were halfway through catching up with the cancer backlog. We believe that you may have been referring to bringing the 62 day cancer target closer to pre-Covid levels and recovery of the associated backlog. While reducing the number of patients waiting longer than 62 days for their treatment is important, we are concerned that the true scale of the overall cancer backlog is much greater than that represented by the 62 day cancer figures. This overall cancer backlog includes undiagnosed and still waiting to be diagnosed cancers in the screening and radiology backlog, relapsed cancers and those still not treated. We are concerned that we are nowhere near being halfway to clearing this overall backlog.

The question was prompted by the ongoing work of all cancer related APPGs, supporting charities, and the #CatchUpWithCancer campaign's cross-party letter signed by 107 MPs. The strong showing of MP support was, in turn, stimulated in large part by the #CatchUpWithCancer petition on Change.Org which now has 300,000 signees. The fact that so many people are passionately calling for action speaks volumes to the enormity of the national tragedy we all want to avoid. Their stories left on the campaign website make harrowing reading and show the individual suffering, particularly of those dying without access to any treatment. The strength of the public feeling is all too evident as well.

Cancer Research UK estimate that 3 million people in the UK have had their cancer diagnosis and treatment delayed during the Covid crisis and experts believe that the backlog caused by Covid disruption may cost up to 35,000 unnecessary cancer patient deaths without urgent action. In response to a question in the House, it was stated that current NHS data shows that 85,000 people started cancer treatment in March to June. That is around 55,000 fewer patients than we would expect based on normal service. These patients still have cancer and have not gone away and will need to be diagnosed and treated.

We know that every effort is being taken by our fantastic frontline workers to catch up. But even if services were back to 100% pre-Covid capacity that wouldn't be enough to catch up with the overall backlog. Experts predict that we would need to be working at 135% capacity over six months to



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sustain the level of service required to catch up. The reality of the situation is that without an urgent boost to services to catch up, the only way the backlog disappears is through patients dying. That is why we are exceptionally keen that every avenue to boost, rather than to just reinstate, cancer services is explored. As just one example, by its nature, radiotherapy is particularly well placed as a treatment option during a pandemic and we commend to you the APPG for Radiotherapy's 6 point plan to boost that service.

We stand ready to assist you and your team. We urge you to accept our request to meet with you to obtain accurate data on how big the backlog is and how we can help deal with it.

Yours,

Tim Farron MP
Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on
Radiotherapy

Tonia Antoniazzi MP
Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on
Cancer

Mark Tami MP
Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on
Stem Cell Transplantation

Henry Smith MP
Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on
Blood Cancer