



The APPG for Radiotherapy

Tim Farron MP
House of Commons
SW1A 0AA

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

1st April 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

We write to draw to your attention to some specific urgent matters, which, if addressed will be of great help to the Government's long and medium term efforts in responding to the Covid-19 crisis. They relate primarily to **radiotherapy** and thereby are of significance to large numbers of cancer patients. There are concerns that as the Covid-19 response receives the priority and resources it requires, there is a consequential impact on other areas of health, particularly relating to cancer treatment which needs to continue through and well beyond the crisis.

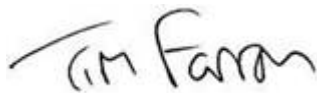
As you know, the Covid-19 mortality in cancer patients is high and due to this and pressures on the system, some cancer patients are seeing their treatment deferred, disrupted or abandoned altogether. The unavoidable impact of recently revised NHSE guidelines relating to cancer treatment is that some patients who would normally receive treatment, won't be able to and, as a consequence, lives will be lost. For these reasons, I hope you will agree that everything that can be done to support and protect cancer patients and staff and increase the capacity to treat cancer patients, that does not compromise the Covid-19 response should be done. Radiotherapy is already one of the nation's most important cancer treatments and is increasingly needed as an alternative as surgery and chemotherapy become clinically more difficult to deliver to cancer patients at this time. We feel that the following matters require your urgent attention over and above the general health care measures you are taking as there a few simple immediate measures in radiotherapy treatment access and delivery that could be taken to save cancer patients lives, relieve the stress on NHS front line and anxious cancer patients and their families at this, their most difficult time.

1. **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).** Radiotherapy services are delivered by a small, highly dedicated cohort of around 5,000 professionals. To provide treatment it is necessary for staff to come into close proximity with cancer patients. The cancer patients are particularly susceptible to infection. And in many cases, radiotherapy professionals have to come within a matter of several centimetres of the patients, particularly when configuring radiotherapy machines for treatment of head, neck and other upper body tumours. Radiotherapy professionals feel strongly that they are at risk of infecting their vulnerable patients. Likewise, they worry that they may pick up an infection, with the added concern of then passing it on. For these reasons, the need to prioritise radiotherapy practitioner's PPE is now a matter of the utmost urgency. Indeed, patients are now demanding that the radiotherapy professionals wear PPE. We have received reports from around the country that some radiotherapy centres have no PPE and little priority has been given to this work force and patient group. This lack of PPE will reduce a specialist workforce resource even further as radiographers will be more likely to either succumb to infection themselves or, at the very least, lead to higher incidences of self-isolation. This highly specialist work force cannot be replaced by redeployment from elsewhere. We request that you urgently add the radiotherapy community now to the highest level of priority in terms of the provision of PPE.

- 2. Suspending Current Internal Tariff Regime and Commissioning Constraints on Advanced Radiotherapy and rapidly resource advanced IT.** As the NHS reconfigures and adapts to meet the Covid-19 challenge, NHSE guidelines correctly recommend reducing the number of radiotherapy treatments patients are given, often by using more advanced radiotherapy. This now greatly accelerates and expands the delivery of advanced radiotherapy which we have long called for in our radiotherapy manifesto and written to you about previously. This drive to greater use of advanced techniques makes sense. But, obviously, this is leading to increased demands on the radiotherapy community and is currently not available in all centres. It is hoped/assumed that this will be facilitated by immediately suspending the current Internal tariff regime and commissioning constraints on advanced radiotherapy. Funding for IT communications urgently needs to be brought forward and with funding for a remote buddying system funded after the next few months acute crisis has passed, it will also be possible to enable all centres to deliver the advanced radiotherapy techniques that will have a dramatic impact on radiotherapy capacity. Put simply, the service will be able to treat more cancer patients with the available staffing level and treat them quicker and closer to home and avoid treatments having to be abandoned. We urge you to make a positive announcement on this matter as soon as possible and make whatever funding and support from NHSX is needed available to rapidly allow the introduction of the high tech radiotherapy service which could underpin radiotherapy now and in the time ahead as this will directly save lives.
- 3. Harnessing Private Sector Capacity.** Understandably, the Government has reached out to the private sector to boost NHS capacity in relation to both treatments and equipment, particularly where this relates to expanding NHS capacity to deal with respiratory conditions. However, as yet, we are not aware of any systematic and co-ordinated approach to the private sector in terms of boosting the NHS capacity to deliver radiotherapy, particularly the advanced treatments and even proton therapy. We understand from our informal contacts with the private sector (which has around 20 radiotherapy centres around the country) that some of their facilities have significant spare capacity. We believe that this excess private capacity could be, and should be, made available to the NHS. Such a move would reduce the pressure on the existing NHS radiotherapy resource and help reduce the disruption to patients. We urge you to investigate this possibility as a matter of urgency.

We look forward to hearing your response,

Kind regards



Tim Farron MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Radiotherapy



Grahame Morris MP, Vice-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Radiotherapy