



The Royal College of Pathologists

Pathology: the science behind the cure

## Joint APPG Catch Up With Cancer summit Consultation: Solutions to the COVID induced cancer backlog

May 2021

### Backlogs in cancer services

The College welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation to gather recommendations on solutions to tackle the COVID induced cancer backlog.

Following disruption caused by COVID-19, the Royal College of Pathologists (RCPATH) has serious concerns over preparations to deal with the backlog of non COVID-19 related illness, especially cancer care, and the related surge of demand for pathology services, particularly for cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Cancer will affect half of us all at some time in our lives. It is a devastating and terrible disease, but modern treatments coupled with early detection and monitoring offer us hope that we can beat it. Pathology is central to this early diagnosis and ongoing monitoring, as well as being vital for cancer prevention and screening, but pathology is facing a workforce crisis which must be addressed if we are to win the fight against cancer.

Pathology is key to prevention, screening, and early detection of cancer. It saves lives and it saves money. If we are to beat cancer, we must invest in pathology.

From current January cancer waiting times, there are 37,000 fewer people who have commenced a first treatment for cancer from the start of the pandemic, compared to 2019 data. To get through this backlog, Macmillan Cancer Support project that this will take up to 15 months to address only if the system operates consistently at 110%.

### Pathology workforce challenges

While the College welcomes the £1 billion to tackle the elective backlog promised by the Chancellor at the Spending Review, pathology workforce shortages highlighted 'pre-COVID' remain. Although

recruitment into histopathology has increased, there remains a 25% shortfall in staff able to report results, with some regions having even higher shortages.

Workforce pressures across the four UK nations are being compounded by the pandemic. There have been reductions in patients seeking help for their symptoms, including a significant decline in referrals from primary care leading to substantial delays in diagnosis and a significant backlog of cases.

Building the cancer workforce, not just in histopathology, but also in haematology and other areas of pathology, has to be a key investment priority for government. Without this investment there will be no capacity for pathology to deal with any increase in workload associated with efforts to overcome this backlog.

The expertise of haematologists is central to patient management and care; for example, by advising GPs and doctors in other specialties on the best tests to perform and interpreting and communicating the significance of the test results.

Clinical biochemists play a key role in diagnosing patients with a wide variety of illnesses – from high cholesterol to rare genetic diseases and bowel cancer.

## Training and recruitment

As well as more investment to recruit and retain more pathology staff, the College would also like to see more training places, better IT for day-to-day work and capital investment to implement digital pathology more widely, so staff can work more efficiently and flexibly.

## IT and infrastructure

Rapid IT infrastructure transformation, hardware to replace the nearly 30% of Laboratory Information Management Systems (LIMS) that are virtually obsolete, connectivity to link systems, and, for histopathology and haematology, digital imaging will be key to making services more stable and efficient. There have been some good examples of single LIMS roll outs in Wales that have made patients' test results more accessible, and able to be reported across the country. Similarly, some regions have good systems that link many hospitals and indeed some acute and primary care systems. These models need to be widely adopted. LIMS are vital to effectively manage samples, and associated data and automate workflows.

## Digital pathology

One area the College is keen to develop as a profession is to harness technology to achieve the best possible outcomes for the workforce and patients. Digital pathology has the potential to improve patient care and support the pathology workforce by making the diagnosis and monitoring of disease much more efficient. However, in order to transform pathology services and support patient care and safety, we need investment in IT infrastructure, staffing and training.

Digital pathology also facilitates remote working in several ways which are useful during the pandemic and going forward will help with staffing issues - home reporting, avoiding the need to be



physically in the same space as a colleague giving a second opinion, and facilitating trainee pathologists in learning.

Any investment should also build on the initial investment of the NHS to develop centres of excellence in digital pathology nationally. These centres can help with any further expansion of the technology across the NHS, by sharing knowledge and standards. It is the view of the College that digital pathology should be centrally funded and rolled out nationally in a similar way to digital radiology.

## Genomics in medicine

Genomic medicine provides an incredible opportunity for faster, accurate diagnosis and tailored treatment for people with cancer, and with inherited diseases. However, it is essential that there is equity of access to tests and the associated treatment(s).

Developments in genomics will require significant investment – staff need to be equipped with knowledge, and laboratories with necessary equipment. Pathologists are at the heart of these developments and hence must be involved throughout the programme, because of their vast experience in tissue handling, processing and reporting.

The College is concerned that there is no planned resource provision for the significantly increased workload that the Genomic Medicine Service will create for pathology, which will grow over time. Without this being addressed there will be issues in providing the quality and level of service desired.

## 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.

