



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;369:m2535<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2535>

Published: 24 June 2020

Covid-19: Doctors feel shut out of plans for dealing with backlog of missed care

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A quarter of doctors have not been involved in planning to deal with the increased demand for non-covid-19 care despite many already seeing a significant rise, a survey by the BMA has found.

A snapshot poll carried out by the association from 16 to 18 June received responses from 7497 doctors.¹ It asked them what engagement they had received, in their place of work or their local health economy, around how increased patient demand would be managed once normal NHS services resumed.

Of the 6735 doctors who responded to the question, 10% (682) reported significant involvement, 40% (2685) reported some involvement, and 25% (1703) had seen no engagement at all. The remaining 25% (1664) were not sure or said that the question was not relevant.

Yet the survey also found a significant increase in demand for non-covid care. Of the 6723 doctors who responded to a question about changes in patient demand, 21% (1414) said that demand was back at pre-March levels, and 43% (2878) said that they had seen a significant increase in demand but to a lower level than before March.

A further 19% (1263) had seen a slight increase, 6% (414) had seen no change, 7% (489) had seen a decrease in demand, and 4% (265) were not sure.

Postponed training

The news came as the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh warned of the potential harm that the increased demand could have on surgical training. It said that, as a result of covid-19, an estimated 10 million people could be waiting for NHS treatment by the end of 2020.

The college noted suggestions that the backlog could be tackled by awarding additional contracts to the private healthcare sector. But this raised concerns about surgical training, it said, because private hospitals were not all automatically approved for such training.

Michael Griffin, president of the college, said that surgical trainees had already lost out on months of their training because of elective operations being postponed during the covid-19 pandemic. He said, "It's absolutely vital that, as elective surgical procedures start to resume, trainees are given the opportunity of first hand training in order to gain the experience they need to allow them to join the surgical workforce."

Chaand Nagpaul, BMA council chair, said that the association was urging the government to publish a plan for how the millions of patients awaiting NHS treatment in England were going to receive care. "In addition, the association also wants the Westminster government to bring together health leaders and staff groups to ensure frontline clinicians are leading discussions on how to prioritise the most urgent cases and how that will be resourced," he said.

¹ BMA. COVID-19 tracker survey. 22 Jun 2020. <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2650/bma-covid-19-survey-results-for-the-uk-18-june-2020.pdf>.

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