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Nearly half of physicians expect to be working under capacity for at least a year, RCP survey finds

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Almost half of physician specialists expect to be working at less than pre-covid-19 levels for at least 12 months, a survey by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) has found.

The college conducted an internal survey of members of its Medical Specialty Board, which includes representatives from 30 specialties. Each member was asked, on behalf of their specialty, to estimate what capacity they expected to be working at over the next 12 months compared with pre-covid-19 activity levels.

The survey had responses from representatives from 19 specialties and of these eight said that they expect to be working under capacity for the foreseeable future. This was partly because of the time it takes for the extra infection prevention and control measures to be carried out, the college said, all of which have been put in place to reduce the spread of covid-19 and reduce nosocomial infection.

Patients recovering from covid-19 will also need the ongoing support of NHS services, especially in respiratory medicine, rehabilitation medicine, renal medicine, and clinical psychology, the college said, which creates extra activity compared with pre-covid-19 times

Specialty leaders in respiratory medicine and gastroenterology said that they expected it to take two years to recover from the backlog created by the virus, while those in cardiology expected it to take 18-21 months.

Commenting on the findings, RCP president Andrew Goddard said, “We cannot underestimate the extent of the work that still lies ahead for the NHS workforce, and the possibility of further covid-19 outbreaks and additional waves, which would increase the challenge ahead.”

He added, “In the short to medium term it is likely that doctors will need to prioritise care, as they have always done, to respond to the reduced capacity levels across the NHS. We also need to be honest with patients that things will take longer and that we are working as hard as possible to restore services to pre-pandemic levels.”

Responding to the findings, Niall Dickson, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said, “There was a significant backlog of treatment before the pandemic—now it is enormous. Services were stopped or slowed down and lockdown has also brought its own raft of health problems. NHS organisations now have to build back services with social distancing and the need for personal protective equipment—that means many fewer patients are treated.”