



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;371:m4579<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m4579>

Published: 24 November 2020

Millions will face surgery delays unless anaesthetic workforce grows, college warns

Abi Rimmer

The Royal College of Anaesthetists has urged the government to invest in increasing the number of anaesthetic trainees, after a workforce census found vacancies in most hospitals.

The college gathered data from 145 NHS trusts in England, five trusts in Northern Ireland, 15 health boards in Scotland, and six boards in Wales, with an overall response rate of 97%.¹

A report on the census findings said that 90% of anaesthesia departments in the UK have at least one unfilled consultant, specialty and associate specialist (SAS) doctor, or anaesthesia associate post. This equated to 680 vacant consultant posts and 243 vacant SAS doctor posts in the UK, it said.

The workforce gap in anaesthetics is unsurprising, the report said, given a steady decline in the number of newly qualified anaesthesia specialists, from 569 in 2013 to 373 in 2019, a 34% reduction.

“Alongside that reduction in supply, demand for senior anaesthetists has increased as the elderly sick population grows, new complex surgical procedures require more experienced senior anaesthetists, additional roles in perioperative medicine are taken on by anaesthetists, anaesthetists in training work more restricted hours, and the amount of weekend and evening work has increased,” it said.

The college warned that more than one million surgical procedures would need to be delayed every year unless the anaesthetic workforce was increased to meet demand. “The consequences of continuing to underinvest in NHS staff will leave anaesthetists—who care for more than two thirds of all NHS hospital patients and who have had a central role on the frontline during covid-19—continuing to struggle to provide full surgical services alongside any future pandemics,” the college said.

Its president, Ravi Mahajan, said investment in anaesthetic training was essential to keep hospital services safe. “As we look to the future, it is more important than ever to recognise that a sustainable health and care workforce is necessary to deliver the NHS People Plan for 2020-21,” he said.

“While we welcomed the government’s £3.7bn of capital funding for hospital development earlier this year, we reiterate our call for investment in the training of qualified staff to work in those places.”

¹ Royal College of Anaesthetists. Medical workforce census report 2020. <https://www.rcoa.ac.uk/medical-workforce-census-report-2020>.