



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;375:n3135
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n3135>
 Published: 22 December 2021

Covid-19: More doctors in London are now off work than at any time during the pandemic

Ingrid Torjesen

Absence levels among the medical workforce in London are now higher than at any time since the start of the pandemic, with one in seven off work and more than half of these because of covid-19, a survey by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) has found.¹

The survey of 1840 fellows and members in clinical practice conducted the week before Christmas (18 to 21 December) found that 13.9% were off work in London and 7.4% off because of covid-19. Both scientists and politicians consider the covid-19 situation in London to be a forerunner of what is in store for the rest of the UK in terms of pressure on the NHS. With high covid-19 infection levels in the community and the increased transmissibility of the omicron variant it is feared that up to one third of NHS staff could be off sick by mid-January.²

Absence rates outside the capital were lower but rising, the RCP said. Across the UK, more than 1 in 10 (10.5%) of those that responded were off work and 1 in 24 (4.2%) off because of covid-19. Of those off work, 18% had suspected or confirmed covid-19 and 19% were isolating because of having contact with cases.

Andrew Goddard, president of the RCP, said, “With 1 in 24 doctors off work because of covid-19, rising to 1 in 13 in London, absence is the worst we have seen during the pandemic other than at the end of March 2020. But at that point we didn’t have access to the personal protective equipment (PPE) we needed, we had cancelled almost all other activity, it was spring, and we were dealing with a less transmissible strain.”

Now the workforce is “tired and demoralised” after managing the pandemic for almost two years, he said, there is the usual winter rise in other respiratory conditions, the NHS is trying to deliver as much non-covid care as possible, and many doctors (45% of those off across the UK) are taking annual leave over Christmas.

The RCP wants to see proper NHS workforce planning that considers current and likely future demand. If the NHS had that, Goddard said, “I predict we would have many more thousand doctors, nurses, and other clinicians.” In its absence, he urged the public to get their vaccinations and boosters as soon as possible and to limit their social interactions. “That’s not a message people want to hear and not one it’s easy to deliver, but if we aren’t cautious, we risk the number of available health and care staff falling to dangerous levels,” he said.

The survey also suggested that doctors are experiencing problems accessing PPE: 14.5% of respondents said they didn’t have the PPE they needed for managing patients with covid-19 and 6.5% said they had been in a situation in the past two weeks where they had not been able to access the PPE advised by the UK Health Security Agency.

- 1 Royal College of Physicians. Covid-19 and the workforce: growing absences increase the pressure, 22 December 2021. www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/outputs/covid-19-and-workforce-growing-absences-increase-pressure
- 2 Thomas R. Hospitals braced for “mass casualty” scenario amid fears one third of NHS staff could be off sick. Independent. 22 December 2021. www.independent.co.uk/news/health/nhs-hospitals-to-plan-for-mass-casualty-situation-b1980268.html.

This article is made freely available for use in accordance with BMJ’s website terms and conditions for the duration of the covid-19 pandemic or until otherwise determined by BMJ. You may use, download and print the article for any lawful, non-commercial purpose (including text and data mining) provided that all copyright notices and trade marks are retained.