



NEWS

Covid-19: Cancer Research urges mass testing to enable care to continue during pandemic

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The BMJ

Cancer Research UK has called for widespread covid-19 testing to ensure that patients and staff can use new “covid-free” centres and hospitals, currently being developed by the NHS, and to prevent unnecessary deaths.

The covid-19 pandemic has led to thousands of people with cancer in the UK having their treatment stopped or delayed, as services are reconfigured to deal with infections.

More than 3500 UK patients with newly diagnosed cancer are usually treated with surgery, chemotherapy, or radiotherapy each week, and more than 15 000 should have started treatment in the past month, said Cancer Research UK. But treatment rates have fallen by 50% in some parts of the country, and fewer patients have been urgently referred for suspected cancer.

The charity warned that delays to cancer treatment, screening, and diagnosis, as well as decreases in people referred with suspected cancer symptoms, would leave the NHS unable to cope with the large backlog once services reopen.

Wide scale testing

NHS England has said that it is developing “covid-free” centres and hospitals around the country, to help ensure that cancer patients with the most urgent needs can receive their treatment quickly—but Cancer Research UK said that this will be possible only with wide scale, frequent testing of NHS staff and patients.

Sarah Woolnough, the charity’s executive director of policy and information, said, “The pandemic has left cancer diagnosis and treatment in a precarious position, and one of the ways that the NHS is adapting to ensure patients are receiving vital testing and care is through ‘covid-19-free’ centres or hospitals. But this won’t be possible without the appropriate testing of all staff and patients.

“Already, Cancer Research UK has helped to increase testing capacity through the Francis Crick Institute. We want to continue to contribute towards the national effort to beat covid-19, so that cancer patients can receive the care that they need during this difficult time.”

Charles Swanton, Cancer Research UK’s chief clinician, commented, “This pandemic is having a major impact on patients suffering from cancer, and the direction it’s heading is really concerning. Delays to diagnosis and treatment could mean that some cancers will become inoperable. But it’s not too late to turn this around. Cancer patients shouldn’t need to wait for the pandemic to pass before getting the treatment they need.”

He added, “We can create a safe environment for both staff and cancer patients now that testing efforts are escalating quickly. Staff in hospitals around the country are working extremely hard, and with more testing of staff and patients—with and without symptoms—we will have hospitals and centres relatively free from covid-19, where patients can be treated safely and post-operative complications can be minimised.”