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Increase medical workforce to tackle covid-19 backlog, doctors' leaders urge

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The NHS will not be able to meet the demands of the covid-19 pandemic and a potential second wave without more staff, doctors' leaders have warned.

In a report¹ published on 19 October, the BMA, with support from medical royal colleges, said that medical workforce numbers—including consultants—must increase to overcome the backlog of work from the pandemic, reduce NHS waiting lists and waiting times, and restore activity to previous levels. To do this, medical school, foundation training programme, and specialty trainee numbers must be increased, the report said.

The report set out a range of short and medium term solutions to tackle consultant shortages and meet the demands of the pandemic. Among the suggested short term measures were making the most effective use of retired doctors who would like to return to work. "During the first peak of the pandemic, 28 000 doctors made themselves available to return to work," the report said, "but only a small proportion of them were eventually deployed."

The wellbeing of consultants and tackling the long term impacts of covid-19 on staff mental health, should also be priorities, the report said. "There is potential for colleagues to experience anxiety, grief, depression, moral injury, and even post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of their experiences," it said. "Supporting staff will be important in helping them avoid ill health and reducing time away from work."

In the medium term, the report argued that changes to the pension taxation system were needed, so that fewer consultants are forced to retire or face large bills. Consultants should also be offered more flexibility in their working patterns, sabbatical leave, and the ability to opt out of on-call work if they wish to later on in their careers, the report said.

Commenting on the report, Rob Harwood, BMA consultants committee chair, said, "We've reached a position where every consultant is more precious than ever, and in the face of an unwavering global pandemic, everything must be done to retain and recruit more doctors as a matter of urgency, not only to help in the fight against covid-19, but also the immense backlog created as a result of the virus."

He added, "It's crucial that our recommendations are thoroughly considered and detailed plans are drawn up to tackle this crisis both for now and in the future. Without that, we risk creating an NHS that no one wants to work in, the consequences of which are potentially catastrophic."

The report was published by the BMA with the support of the Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine, the Royal College of Anaesthetists, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Royal College of Radiologists, and the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

¹ BMA. Consultant workforce shortages and solutions: Now and in the future. October 2020. www.bma.org.uk/media/3429/bma-consultant-workforce-shortages-and-solutions-oct-2020.pdf.