The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;373:n999<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n999>

Published: 16 April 2021

Covid-19: NHS will take at least a year and a half to recover, doctors warn

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Most doctors think that the NHS will take at least 18 months to recover from the pandemic, a survey of members of the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) has found.

The college sent a survey to 25 500 of its members in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland and received 1142 responses, a 4.5% response rate. Of the doctors who completed the survey, 59% (533) said that getting the NHS back to a stable condition would take at least 18 months. Almost a third of these respondents said that backlogs in care resulting from the pandemic would take more than two years to clear. These findings come after figures showing that 4.7 million people in England were waiting to begin treatment at the end of February this year—the highest number since records began in 2007.¹

The RCP survey also looked at staff morale. It found that over two thirds (69%; 583) of doctors were exhausted and 31% (266) were demoralised. Two thirds said that there had still been no discussion in their organisation about time off to recuperate. Of the 29% (252) who had had time off, 59% (147) still felt tired afterwards, and only 27% (68) felt refreshed and ready to return to work. When asked what impact the pandemic had on teamwork, a third (33%; 284) of respondents thought it had a negative impact during the first wave. Two fifths thought it then worsened during the second wave.

Commenting on the survey findings, Andrew Goddard, president of the RCP, said, “Doctors are rightly concerned about the length of time it will take to deal with the enormous backlog of non-covid care that has built up over the pandemic. We know our patients are waiting for treatment, and in many cases have been waiting for some time already.

“The problem is workforce . . . we simply don’t have enough doctors to meet demand, which is why we need to expand the workforce. We need to double the number of medical school places and establish transparent processes to ensure we are training enough people now to meet future demand.”

Eddie Kinsella, chair of the Patient and Carer Network at the RCP, added, “It is essential that a clear plan is produced urgently to address the backlog of cases, matched with appropriate resources. New, innovative ways of working will help, but such a plan must address the longstanding issue of workforce shortages. It would be folly to assume that exhausted clinical staff can simply add to their existing workload in a safe manner.”

¹ O'Dowd A. NHS waiting list hits 14-year record high of 4.7 million people. *BMJ* 2021;373:n995