



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;376:o86<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o86>

Published: 12 January 2022

One in five doctors feels overwhelmed daily by covid and winter pressures, RCP reports

Gareth Iacobucci

Over two thirds of doctors (69%) have felt overwhelmed at work at least once in the past three weeks as rising covid cases and winter illnesses heap pressure on healthcare services, a survey by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) has found.¹

Of 1218 doctors who responded to the poll, a fifth (20.5%) said that they had felt overwhelmed almost every day during those three weeks. Some 21.5% had done so once or twice a week, and 27.5% had felt overwhelmed once or twice. The survey was conducted from 8 to 11 January 2022.

The college said that the results were probably due to high levels of staff absence which, although slightly improved since last month, were still putting “immense pressure” on exhausted and demoralised staff working under “extreme pressure.”

Throughout the UK 7.5% of respondents were off work (compared with 10.5% in December), and 3.5% were absent because of covid-19. Over half of respondents (55%) said that they had been asked to fill a rota gap at short notice at least once during the past three weeks, adding yet further stress to their working days. Of those, almost a quarter (24%) had been asked to fill a rota gap at least once while on annual leave.

Staff availability

While acknowledging that staff absences had been exacerbated by the pandemic, the college said that much of the pressure stemmed from workforce shortages that had existed long before covid-19, and it urged the government to commit to a funded, long term workforce plan.

Andrew Goddard, RCP president, said, “We’re pleased to see that absence due to covid-19 has fallen since December. But it’s clear that availability of workforce remains the limiting factor to both morale and the performance of the NHS.

“Staff are feeling as low as ever before. The conversations I have with colleagues every day lead me to sense a real shift in how well people feel they are able to cope. We need to keep this in mind because, while we may see some light at the end of the covid-19 tunnel, we have a long way to go before we are through the current pressures and have even further to go to clear the backlog.”

He added, “Whilst I am uncomfortable admitting it, I have felt overwhelmed myself a couple of times in recent weeks. I’ve not felt like this since I was a houseman being on call every other night. These are extraordinary times, and it is only through the support of colleagues and family that many of us are coping.

“We are all going to have to do all we can to make sure our multidisciplinary teams are working well, increase flexibility in working and training patterns, and make sure support is in place for colleagues who are struggling. But in the long run, as we and many others keep saying, we simply need to invest in more people.”

Danny Mortimer, chief executive of NHS Employers and deputy chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said, “This survey confirms that staff shortages and an exhausted workforce present the greatest challenge to the recovery of our NHS and the return of safe, high quality health services for all.

“For their part, the government must clearly describe how their investments to date will help and what further priorities they will set to boost workforce numbers. Weary healthcare staff need to be given hope that help is coming.”

¹ Royal College of Physicians. Press release: One in five doctors feels overwhelmed at work every day. 12 Jan 2022. <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/press-release-one-five-doctors-feels-overwhelmed-work-every-day>