Shortages of radiology and oncology staff putting cancer patients at risk, college warns

Matthew Limb

Patients in the UK with cancer are at risk from “devastating” effects of shortfalls of key radiology and oncology staff, leading specialists have warned.

The Royal College of Radiologists said that current workforce problems were “unsustainable” and that every month delayed cancer treatment raised the risk of death by around 10%. It highlighted service heads’ concerns for safe patient care, high levels of staff stress and burnout, affecting retention, a growing reliance on staff from overseas, a worrying use of expensive locums, and regional inequalities in the ability to deliver lifesaving cancer care.

The college published two census reports on 9 June that were based on surveys completed by every clinical director and head of service in the UK: one examining the state of clinical radiology in 2021 and the other clinical oncology.1

Jeanette Dickson, president of the college, said, “The situation we’re in is simply unsustainable. As these reports show, the impact of doctor shortages is being felt across the country and is affecting our ability to diagnose devastating illnesses such as heart disease and stroke but also our ability to diagnose and treat cancer in a timely manner.”

The clinical radiology census found that although more consultant radiologists had entered the workforce—up by 225 consultants or 6%, from 3902 in 2020 to 4127 in 2021—this was not enough to tackle the overall shortfall and meet rising demand. The report said there was a 29% shortfall of consultants (1669 whole time equivalents) and more than 200 vacancies across the UK, leading to huge pressure on staff, and that this could rise to 39% (3166 WTE) by 2026 without further investment.

Nearly all clinical directors (98%) were worried about workforce morale, stress, and burnout in their departments and the negative effects on workforce retention and patient safety. Some 97% of clinical directors said they were concerned about the backlogs and delays that patients were experiencing; 81% cited worries about patient safety.

Over half (55%) of clinical directors said they did not have enough interventional radiologists to deliver safe and effective patient care.

The UK increasingly relies on consultant radiologists from overseas. The percentage of doctors who obtained their primary medical qualification outside the UK has increased from 29% in 2016 to 35% in 2021.

The clinical oncology census reported that the backlog of care from the covid-19 pandemic had resulted in 50 000 patients missing a cancer diagnosis and a 12% fall in radiotherapy treatment courses that are vital to patients with cancer.

Cancer targets were also missed, with only 67% of patients being treated within two months of an urgent GP referral.

Despite the pandemic related reduction in patient numbers, the UK continued to have a 17% shortfall of clinical oncologists in 2021, translating to 189. Without investment in the workforce the shortfall is estimated to rise to 26% (381) by 2026.

In 2021 two thirds (67%) of cancer centre heads of service were concerned about workforce shortfalls affecting the quality of care, up from 52% in 2020.

Although London had the highest ratio of specialists of 5.4 per 100 000 older people, in the East Midlands and North and West Wales these figures fell to 2.9 and 1.5, respectively.

The Royal College of Radiologists estimated that around 80% of hospital pathways rely on medical imaging, so if clinical radiology departments are not fully staffed the impact is felt across the NHS, as late diagnosis leads to more complicated and expensive treatment. It said that each delay and missed target could increase time to treatment, leading to a higher probability of side effects going unmanaged and a greater likelihood of a cancer becoming incurable, with a devastating effect on patients and their families.

Dickson said, “More training places have been provided recently, but we need a long term, fully funded sustained investment that builds in a permanent increase in training numbers, trust funding to employ these trainees, and significant investment in IT and equipment.”

A spokesperson for the Department of Health and Social Care for England said, “There are record numbers of doctors, nurses, and healthcare staff working in the NHS, and our 10 year cancer plan will set out how we will lead Europe in cancer care.”

1 Royal College of Radiologists. RCR census reports 2021 launched Jun 2022. https://www.rcr.ac.uk/census2021