



The Royal College of Pathologists

Pathology: the science behind the cure

# Briefing: The pathology workforce involved in cancer services in Northern Ireland

24 February 2021

## Background

This policy briefing from the Royal College of Pathologists looks at the workforce challenges facing the pathology specialties involved in cancer services in Northern Ireland.

Pathologists are at the heart of cancer screening, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring. Pathology is the service that handles the cells and tissues removed from suspicious 'lumps and bumps', identifies the nature of the abnormality and, if malignant, provides evidence to the clinician on the type of cancer, its grade and, for some cancers, its responsiveness to certain treatments.

The College hosts regional councils, comprising specialty members, for the devolved nations. These councils provide professional leadership in their country and contribute at a national level to the maintenance and development of pathology services and the quality of care that patients receive. Professor Ken Mills, Chair, Northern Ireland Regional Council said:

*'Pathology services are critical to prompt and accurate diagnosis of patients with cancer and other diseases. It is essential that the Stormont Executive recognises the impact that pathologists and clinical scientists make and invests in their expertise and technologies.'*

The Royal College of Pathologists is pleased that cancer patients in Northern Ireland will have the same access to drugs currently being offered to patients in the rest of the UK having faced two years of inequitable access to cancer medicines.

## Pathology specialties involved in cancer diagnostics

- Histopathology is the diagnosis and study of diseases of tissue and involves examining tissue and/or cells under a microscope. Histopathologists are responsible for making tissue diagnoses and helping clinicians manage a patient's care. Histopathologists have key responsibilities for cancer screening, at the moment for breast, bowel and cervical cancer, with other programmes expected in the near future.
- Haematologists are doctors who are experts in blood, including cells already circulating in the blood and those being made in the cell factories of the bone marrow. Haematologists study blood disorders, including blood cancers and diagnose and treat these cancers.
- Blood transfusion is an important responsibility of haematologists. Some have expertise in blood and marrow stem cell transplantation to treat a range of life-threatening malignant and non-malignant disorders.
- Cytopathology is the study of cells in body fluids, smears and tissue samples, for example the study of cervical smears for the detection of changes in the cervix that could lead to cancer.
- Clinical biochemists play a key role in diagnosing patients with a wide variety of illnesses – from high cholesterol to rare genetic diseases and bowel cancer.

## Key messages

- Capital funding is essential, and it should be focused on modernisation and optimisation of services in Northern Ireland. For example, the pathology modernisation alongside molecular pathology digital imaging for pathology is under-resourced and is behind the rest of the UK.
- We welcome the progress so far to replace the existing Laboratory Information Management Systems (LIMS). This is a really important step in the transformation of pathology services in Northern Ireland. The IT system will bring numerous patient benefits and improve pathology services for patients in Northern Ireland e.g. by making patients' test results more accessible and improving access to expert advice and opinion on diagnoses.
- The College calls for increased investment in pathology services, particularly in the recruitment and training of pathologists and scientists and clinical and biomedical scientists.
- The College recommends more investment in laboratory staff in Northern Ireland, who are under-resourced and under-valued, to enable more effective diagnosis and monitoring. Too much funding is wasted by inappropriate testing or send-away testing due to geographic restraints.
- The College has concerns about Scientist Training Programme (STP) posts in Northern Ireland. Several Trusts have indicated that they will not take on any future STP posts unless there is a consultant post available for them in the future. The lack of funding for higher specialist training posts is a substantial barrier that is being addressed currently with the



Department of Health. It is essential that funding for higher specialist posts is supported to bridge the gap until consultant posts are vacated.

- There are no specialist paediatric histopathology services in Northern Ireland which means that post-mortem examinations on infants are carried out in England.

## COVID-19 and pathology services

- Workforce pressures are being compounded by the pandemic. There have been reductions in patients seeking help for their symptoms, including a huge decline in referrals from primary care and substantial delays in diagnosis due to cessation of diagnostic services.
- Following disruption caused by COVID-19, the College has serious concerns over preparations to deal with the backlog of non COVID-19 related illness, especially cancer care, and the related surge of demand for pathology services, particularly for cancer diagnosis and treatment.
- The coronavirus crisis has highlighted pre-existing problems facing rural trusts in N Ireland. Our members tell us that this means patients wait longer for a diagnosis in rural areas. It can be hard to recruit and retain doctors and nurses who are willing to work in smaller hospitals, which means trusts rely more heavily on agency staff to fill gaps in rotas. This has a knock-on effect on patient care with patients travelling long distances.
- Many district general hospitals have been unable to fill microbiology posts over recent years, and workforce pressures are keenly felt. This is important as these members work on infection control. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic our microbiology, virology and infection control team members have continued to support patients, the public and College members during the spread of COVID-19. This will not be the last pandemic - capacity will always be needed for major incidents and disease outbreaks.

## The pathology workforce

- While Northern Ireland overall has a younger workforce profile than other parts of the UK, it is essential that we continue to have enough trainees to maintain the workforce. Assuming all staff aged over 55 retire in the next 5 years, only 85% of the current workforce in Northern Ireland would be in place and this will continue to decrease.
- Since the launch of our [histopathology workforce report](#), a pay premium has been introduced for new histopathology trainees in England. We are now calling for the recruitment and retention premium to be extended to all, including specialist histopathology trainees in areas in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- We would like to see a regional workforce plan that protects the regional speciality services from recruitment drain to other Trusts (i.e. created by lack of a funded regional succession plan).



Pathology workforce challenges:

- There is a growing demand for pathology services, both in the number and complexity of tests performed, caused by developments in testing such as the introduction of the faecal immunochemical test (FIT) and new targeted therapies needing genetic or molecular tests on samples.
- Staffing levels have not risen in line with demand. Pathology services are unable to recruit to vacant posts - it can take up to 15 years to train a pathologist.
- Pathology departments have already undertaken a vast amount of work to meet increased demand (without additional investment) while maintaining quality. Pathologists' contribution to key activities such as research and education is being sacrificed to meet increased service demands.

The College will:

- Continue to work closely with the Institute for Biomedical Science (IBMS) to support biomedical scientist (BMS) reporting, administering examinations and awarding of qualifications.
- Continue to support the National Cancer Research Institute Cellular Molecular Pathology (CM-Path) initiative, particularly in developing the skills and capacity to grow academic molecular pathology.
- Continue to increase the molecular pathology component of training curricula to ensure that the specialists of the future are equipped with the skills they need.
- Continue to push for greater IT investment to support patient care and safety. 30% of Laboratory Information Management Systems (LIMS) are over 30 years old. These are vital to effectively manage samples, and associated data, and automate workflows.
- Recommend that the Department of Health provides funding/supports the funding for Clinical Scientist training after STP completion to bridge the gap between STP and consultant posts.

## Further information

Our [On the agenda](#) website pages outline the College's position on topical subject areas in pathology such as [the pathology workforce](#) and [cancer diagnostics](#).

Find out more about the different areas of pathology on the College [What is pathology](#) website page.

## References

1. The Royal College of Pathologists, Meeting Pathology Demand, Histopathology workforce census, 2018.



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## About the Royal College of Pathologists

The Royal College of Pathologists is a professional membership organisation with more than 11,000 fellows, affiliates and trainees, of which 23% are based outside of the UK. We are committed to setting and maintaining professional standards and promoting excellence in the teaching and practice of pathology, for the benefit of patients.

Our members include medically and veterinary qualified pathologists and clinical scientists in 17 different specialties, including cellular pathology, haematology, clinical biochemistry, medical microbiology and veterinary pathology.

The College works with pathologists at every stage of their career. We set curricula, organise training and run exams, publish clinical guidelines and best practice recommendations and provide continuing professional development. We engage a wide range of stakeholders to improve awareness and understanding of pathology and the vital role it plays in everybody's healthcare. Working with members, we run programmes to inspire the next generation to study science and join the profession.

