The Royal College of Pathologists
Pathology: the science behind the cure

The Royal College of Pathologists' response to the Welsh parliament consultation on gynaecological cancers

19 December 2022

Background

The Royal College of Pathologists' Welsh Council welcomes the chance to respond to this consultation on gynaecological cancers.

Like other cancer pathways, the gynaecologic cancer pathway also has two bottlenecks: the first is the wait time for an appointment, and the second is the delay between the appointment and the release of the initial diagnostic test results.

According to StatsWales data, it takes 20 to 25 days for each diagnosis on average. The pathology laboratory enters the picture in the second bottleneck. Biopsies for suspected cancer are supposed to be reported in seven days, but it takes more than two weeks in some health boards. These are primarily due to increased workload caused by COVID recovery, as well as staff shortages, particularly of Pathologists across many health boards. The Pathologist's work is further complicated in the case of endometrial cancer by the addition of companion special tests and molecular tests.

What is being done?

Actions are being taken to encourage collaborative working between health boards where one department which is struggling due to a shortage of gynaecologic pathologists, is supported by another that is adequately staffed for the specialty. This is done mainly in cervical cancer screening diagnostic biopsies. It is improving the report turnaround time. However, delays in the physical transport of slides, as well as the additional transportation of special tests, are other limiting factors.

What is the way forward?

Embracing digital technology, particularly digital pathology, can help to streamline the process. It eliminates the need for transportation of specimens or prepared slides. The slides prepared in individual laboratories can be uploaded to a digital network. A pathologist at any Welsh health board will be able to report it.

Different health boards are advancing at different rates in the implementation of digital pathology. Utilized extensively in lymphoma diagnosis, this technology has significantly reduced the time required for specialist reporting. This model is applicable to the diagnosis of gynaecologic cancers as well.

What is needed?

Digital pathology is a priority for health boards, and various committees ensure that national level leadership and strategies are in place.

There is an increased dependence on IT for the implementation of digital pathology. For a digital service to be sustainable and dependable, a robust IT support system is an absolute necessity. Pathology laboratories are currently experiencing difficulty in this area. There is also need for investment in Artificial Intelligence projects to screen and triage cancer biopsies.

Contact details

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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.