



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

Election Priorities

Pathologists are essential to disease prevention, diagnosis and treatment to improve patient care.

The work of pathologists supports patients throughout their entire life. Without pathologists, we cannot understand what is making a patient unwell, determine a treatment and monitor their progress.

In this priorities document, we look at the key challenges facing pathologists in delivering the best patient care and call on the next government to address them.

2024

1 Investing in workforce for patients

The UK has an aging population and rising levels of obesity, increasing the number of people living with complex health conditions. These drive the demand for clinical pathology services – both in the number and the complexity of tests performed. The UK has a higher rate of cancer cases than Europe, on average, but proportionally fewer cancer healthcare staff and less equipment to treat patients, with widespread shortages across cancer professions.

The pathology workforce needs sustained investment to effectively meet the current and growing demand for its services. There are not enough pathologists and scientists to enable services to be delivered safely, effectively and equally to all regions of the UK.

- Over the next 5 years, we will lose 21% of experienced consultants to retirement.
- Nationally, there has been an increase in histopathology activity of 30% since 2018–2019, however the consultant workforce has grown by only 8% over the same period.

The College's calls for the next government



A focus on retaining experienced staff is vital. There is a rising risk of imminent retirement of many experienced consultants. These consultants are critical to delivering high-quality services, supervising, teaching and training the future workforce and shaping future services.



Investment in the recruitment and training of pathologists and scientists to include fully funded training places.



Recognition that small pathology specialties are especially fragile and need particular attention to avert a workforce crisis. They include paediatric pathology, neuropathology, forensic and ophthalmic pathology and immunology.

2 Tailoring treatment for patients

Genomic medicine provides an incredible opportunity for faster, accurate diagnosis for patients with cancer and with inherited diseases.

To deliver the full potential of genomics for patients, there needs to be significant investment in staffing and equipment for pathology/genomic laboratories, otherwise patients will fail to benefit from earlier diagnosis, access to new drugs and improved chances of survival.

The College's call for the next government



It is essential that there is equity of access to genomic tests and treatment across the UK. There needs to be continued investment, innovation and research to ensure patients benefit from genomic testing no matter where they live.

3 Harnessing digital pathology for better patient care

Digital pathology – the collection, management, sharing and interpretation of pathology information in a digital environment – improves patient care and supports the pathology workforce. It makes diagnosis more efficient, allows faster access to a second opinion and enables rapid referral of cases between health organisations. It supports flexible working and enhances collaboration between pathologists.

Embedding digital pathology lays the foundation for the collective readiness for artificial intelligence (AI) support tools that are in development. These have the potential to transform the diagnostic landscape, improve health outcomes, shorten waiting lists and increase efficiency.

The College's call for the next government



There needs to be significant and sustained investment in digital pathology, AI and IT and laboratory infrastructure.



Laboratory IT systems need to be updated as they are generally old and inflexible. There is often a lack of interoperability between NHS Trusts, which means results cannot be electronically shared, transferred or collected.



Funding for skilled IT support staff for laboratories is key to implement and maintain new systems and software.

4 Diagnosis closer to patients

Point-of-care testing is a diagnostic medical test conducted outside the laboratory, frequently in a community setting or a patient's home. It can provide a result that can be acted upon immediately, supporting rapid assessment and treatment.

The College's call for the next government



Provide properly costed financial resources to support high quality, fit for purpose and safe point-of-care testing services that meet patients' needs.



Grow the diagnostic workforce to support point-of-care testing.