

Pathology staff shortages causing delays to cancer diagnosis, says report

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NHS pathology departments are suffering from chronic staff shortages, finds a new report.

The [workforce census](#) by the Royal College of Pathologists revealed that just 3 in 100 departments have enough staff to meet clinical demand.

The report concludes that staff shortages are contributing to NHS [cancer diagnosis](#) delays. Experts warned that, without Government action, these vital diagnostic services "could be in jeopardy."

Histopathologists are specially trained to spot changes in cells caused by disease. They diagnose cancer and other diseases by looking at samples in a lab. Their expertise is also used to assess how aggressive a cancer is, which guides treatment.

Worrying delays

Professor Jo Martin, president of the Royal College of Pathologists, said the staff shortages are leading to worrying delays in diagnosis and treatment for cancer patients.

"For NHS hospitals, it [the shortage of staff] means spending more resources on locum doctors to fill staffing gaps, or outsourcing services," she said.

Plugging the gaps with short-term staff is estimated to cost the NHS £27m each year, according to the report. And Martin believes the money could be better invested in staff and new diagnostic equipment.

She added that demand for [pathology](#) services has grown significantly in recent years and continues to grow. "The pathology workforce has not increased in line with this demand. If this trend continues unchecked, clinical services could be in jeopardy."

Pressures on staff

The report also highlights the pressures doctors face from increased workloads due to new developments like screening programmes and transformations in personalised medicine, which require specialised tests to match patients to drugs

The report states that 1 in 4 histopathologists are aged 55 or over and are therefore approaching retirement.

A range of solutions to help address the shortage were also proposed, including more funded training places, greater incentives to help hire trainees in hard-to-recruit areas, and improvements to IT systems to prevent delays in day-to-day work.

Emlyn Samuel, Cancer Research UK's head of policy development called for health officials to do more to protect the histopathology workforce which is vital to cancer care.

"This report is another compelling example of why the Government and NHS must address [staff](#) shortages in professions, like pathology, which are vital in the diagnosis and treatment of [cancer](#)," he said.

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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