

Briefing: Implications of the EU referendum

21 July House of Lords Debate: Implications of the EU referendum result on ensuring safe staffing levels in the NHS and social care services

Background

This briefing has been prepared by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) ahead of the House of Lords debate on the implications of the EU referendum result on ensuring safe staffing levels in the NHS and social care services, sponsored by Baroness Watkins of Tavistock. The briefing is based on the experiences of the RCP's 32,000 members and fellows, predominately hospital doctors.

Key points and figures

- Doctors from the EU make up a significant proportion of the NHS doctor workforce about 10%.
- The UK is already facing significant recruitment problems, 40% of advertised consultants posts remain unfilled.
- The number of medical trainees has decreased 2.3% within the last year. This is creating significant implications in the future delivery of care particularly as the needs of patients increase.
- The government must guarantee that doctors from the EU will continue to be able to work in the NHS. The NHS workforce is already under-doctored and the government must ensure that *all* doctors they feel valued and supported to deliver excellent patient care.

Current recruitment challenges

The NHS is facing significant challenges in the recruitment and retention of consultant doctors. Research undertaken by the RCP has found that there are significant rota gaps in consultant posts across the country¹. The most recent round of the RCP's Census of Consultant Physicians found that **40% of consultant appointments could not be made**. Geriatric and Acute internal medicine are the specialities with the most failed appointments and rural areas outside of London facing the biggest rota gaps. The most common reason is that there is a **lack of suitable applicants**. These figures are highly concerning as these posts have been **identified as necessary for the delivery of patient care**, but the UK does not have enough doctors to staff these rotas.

These gaps are not only present in consultant posts but also in trainee posts as well. The number of medical **trainees has reduced during the last 4 years and has decreased by 2.3% in the last year**. This is affecting the delivery of patient care. Among our members and fellows, **21% of consultants' report 'significant gaps in the trainees rotas such that patient care is compromised' and 10% of consultants often 'act down' to fill vacant trainee posts**. They act down to ensure that patients are still able to access care, however this is not a sustainable model for the future, particularly as patient need and demand on services continues to steadily increase.

¹ www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/outputs/2014-15-census-uk-consultants-and-higher-specialty-trainees

These gaps are worrying particularly as the UK population ages and patients' needs increase and become more complicated. Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) show a **65% increase in secondary care episodes for those over 75** during the past 10 years, compared with 31% for those aged 15–59². There is also a **third fewer general and acute beds now** than there were 25 years ago³.

Importance of Doctors from EU countries

Doctors from the EU and across the globe play an important role in the delivery of care and in filling the significant rota gaps outlined above. Around **10% of doctors working in the NHS come from EU countries**⁴. The RCP has heard from members and fellows that doctors from EU countries and internationally are feeling increasingly uncertain about their future within the NHS which has exacerbated the **current rock bottom morale of NHS workforce**. While the RCP strongly welcomes comments supporting the role of EU doctors, the government must give **strong commitments that doctors from the EU will be able to continue work in the NHS and care for patients**.

The RCP is concerned over reports that NHS staff from EU countries have been subjected to xenophobic abuse following the referendum vote. **All NHS staff must be valued and supported to deliver high quality care**. The NHS must ensure that all members of staff are working in a safe environment and the first priority must be to remove any xenophobic attacks on staff.

RCP key asks of government

- Ensure that EU staff work in a safe and supportive environment. No member of NHS staff should be subject to xenophobic attacks or abuse.
- Guarantee that EU nationals working in the NHS will be able to stay in the UK and continue to deliver excellent care for patients.
- That the current workforce crisis facing the NHS is not exacerbated through restricting non-UK doctors from working in the NHS.

About the RCP

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) aims to improve patient care and reduce illness, in the UK and across the globe. We are patient centred and clinically led, and our 32,000 members worldwide work in hospitals and the community across 30 different medical specialties, diagnosing and treating millions of patients with a huge range of medical conditions.

Involving patients and carers at every step, the RCP works to ensure that physicians are educated and trained to provide high-quality care, audits and accredits clinical services, and provides resources for our members to assess their own services. We work with other health organisations to enhance the quality of medical care, and promote research and innovation. We also promote evidence-based policies to government to encourage healthy lifestyles and reduce illness from preventable causes.

For more information please contact

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² Hospital Episode Statistics. www.hesonline.nhs.uk/Ease/servlet/ContentServer?siteID=1937 [Accessed 3 September 2012]

³ Imison C, Poteliakhoff E, Thompson J. Older people and emergency bed use. Exploring variation. London: King's Fund, 2012

⁴ http://www.gmc-uk.org/doctors/register/search_stats.asp