NHS services, seven days a week: response from the Royal College of Radiologists

The Royal College of Radiologists (RCR) welcomes the publication by NHS England of clinical standards for achieving seven day care in the NHS in England. The RCR represents the two specialties of clinical radiology and clinical oncology. Both clinical radiologists and clinical oncologists are essential to the delivery of high-quality seven-day consultant-directed services.

We firmly believe that it is wrong that patients needing NHS care at the weekend can suffer more because the services they need are not available or are not of the same standard as during the rest of the working week. We are especially pleased that the pivotal role that both diagnostic and interventional radiology play in delivering care at all times has been recognised. Radiologists as doctors skilled in the diagnosis and minimally invasive treatment of patients make a major contribution to the delivery of consistent and high quality services.

Clinical oncologists deliver seven-day care to an increasingly elderly population with multiple co-morbidities, who are receiving complex anti-cancer therapies.

The RCR: leading the way and setting standards

Clinical radiology services
As the standard setting and leadership body for radiology services throughout the UK, we have already issued standards and guidance for delivering services:
- Standards for providing a 24-hour diagnostic radiology service
- Standards for providing a 24-hour interventional radiology service
- Seven day consultant present care implementation considerations
(see section prepared by this College).

Diagnostic radiology services
NHS radiology services have already made significant moves towards a seven day service in recent times. Further moves in this direction cannot be based on increasing the demand on individual, hard-pressed radiologists to work longer hours. There is a clear need for expansion of the consultant radiologist workforce which has already been recognised by Health Education England. However, even if funding can be secured for the agreed increased training numbers, this will not have a major impact on service delivery for at least five years.

The RCR proposes that until significant expansion of the consultant workforce is achieved, providing an equitable and sustainable seven day service can only be achieved through different patterns of working. There is strong support in the radiological community for network solutions which are likely to be more sustainable and cost effective than the alternative of ad hoc outsourcing arrangements. We will work with provider organisations and commissioners to explore the development of radiology networks which we believe offer the best option for the provision of safe, high quality, cost-effective and sustainable seven day services.
Increasing pressure on the existing workforce whether through longer hours or greater intensity of work is not a sustainable solution.

Interventional radiology services
We have already offered our guidance in the document produced by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges\(^4\) on providing acute interventional radiology services. There is no single model, but networks or hub-and-spoke solutions can provide the services to patients that are needed. Both these solutions require the movement of sick patients. However, as is well recognised throughout medicine, the skills and sophistication of treatment now possible mean that it is neither practical nor affordable to offer high end services on all sites. In fact to do so would put patients needing such services at more risk than concentrating these services in fewer, specialist centres. To achieve this, as the RCR has been saying for some time, the interventional radiologist workforce must grow - not by abstracting training resources from diagnostic trainee numbers but by investing in a larger interventional workforce. Such services have been shown time and again to provide critical, high end, interventions that save lives and reduce the length of hospital stay.

Clinical oncology services
Oncology patients can present as acute emergencies, both through Accident and Emergency and direct to specialist oncology units. These patients require prompt attention and seven-day services are essential. Delivery of consistent national seven-day consultant-directed services has implications for the size of the clinical oncology workforce.

Shaping change
Despite the demand for rapid development of seven day services, it is essential that the solutions developed are sustainable and right for the long term. There is a significant risk that short term solutions such as increased outsourcing of services will not achieve the ultimate aim of improving patient care and may come at much greater financial cost.

Skill mix has a part to play\(^5\) but will not solve this problem. Comprehensive seven day services will however require more support for consultant radiologists from radiographers, nurses, clerical staff, porters and all others who make up the team. The document\(^5\) produced by the RCR jointly with the Society and College of Radiographers on team working sets out the current position of both colleges.

It is well recognised that radiologists and oncologists have a key role as leaders in shaping and effecting change. We have already identified the need to support radiologists and oncologists in acquiring leadership skills and we have embarked on a number of initiatives including the Leading Transformational culture change programme\(^6\).

Capital equipment
Radiology and radiotherapy services depend on the availability of expensive capital equipment. Utilising that equipment over seven days rather than five days makes sound financial sense but this will reduce the lifespan of individual items of equipment. This has to be recognised in NHS asset management and capital replacement programmes.

More to be done
Progress has been made in running radiology services for seven days a week but there is much more to be done and it cannot be delivered without significant further investment. Likewise progress is being made in providing seven-day clinical oncology services, including services required for the review of acutely ill patients admitted as emergencies. Further work is needed and this will require additional investment. This is especially important in getting patients the care they need through early and accurate diagnosis and in providing crucial, sometimes life-saving, interventional radiology services.

Although the “Keogh standards” have been developed by NHS England, we believe that similar aspirations exist across the whole of the UK, and as a UK-wide body we will continue to work to improve care for patients in all four countries.
The RCR will play its part:

- We will continue to make the case for growing numbers of consultant diagnostic and interventional radiologists and consultant clinical oncologists across the UK. Our annual workforce censuses\(^7\)(\(^8\)) give a very clear picture of the demands there are now and what is likely to happen. Our statement Investing in the clinical radiology workforce; the quality and efficiency case\(^9\) contains data about the growing demand both in volume and complexity of the work that is now presenting to NHS services.
- We will promote networked models of radiology service provision which offer the best prospect of maintaining high quality local services to patients in a sustainable and cost-effective way.
- We will continually look at how services can be delivered across the whole week and will review our standards and guidance in both faculties to this end.
- We will offer advice and guidance on an individual basis to our Fellows and members who approach us.
- We will continue to work with other professional bodies to promote the multi-professional delivery of imaging and oncology services.

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References

1. NHS services, seven days a week. NHS England. December 2013
2. Standards for providing a 24-hour diagnostic radiology service. BFCR(09)3. The Royal College of Radiologists. 2009
3. Standards for providing a 24-hour interventional radiology service BFCR(08)13. The Royal College of Radiologists. 2008
4. Seven day consultant present care implementation considerations. Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. 2013