Radiology workforce: the challenges in Scotland

The annual radiology workforce census for 2016 shows that in Scotland:

Demand for radiology services continues to increase annually, particularly in computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), with a mean annual growth rate of over 10%. The mean annual increase in whole-time equivalent (WTE) consultants in Scotland over the last six years is 1%. The mismatch between growth in workforce and demand is most marked in Scotland relative to the rest of the UK.

Twenty-two per cent of Scottish consultant radiologists now work less than full-time (LTFT), up from 12% in 2010.

At the time of the census in 2016, there were 34 vacant consultant posts in Scotland; this has since increased and now stands at 52.

Scotland fills all trainee places year on year. Radiology has the second lowest proportion of trainees to consultants of all medical specialty groups – 26% compared with the mean of 40%. There are insufficient trainees to replenish the radiology consultant workforce given the increasing workload demand.

Fifty-seven consultant radiologists representing nearly 20% of the consultant radiology workforce in Scotland are expected to retire by 2021.

Outsourcing costs remain high at approximately £4.5 million per year, with additional monies spent on on locums and agency staff of approximately £10 million per year.

Many studies remain unreported for more than six weeks in Scotland.

If radiologists workforce shortages are not addressed, this will most likely mean patients will wait longer for the results of their imaging examinations, delaying treatment initiation and resulting in poorer patient outcomes.

Achievements

An additional 26 trainees have been secured in the last three years and a commitment from the Scottish Government of at least ten additional trainees per year for the next five years, beginning 2017–18, has been agreed which, for the first time, reflects a long-term commitment to the specialty and is very much welcomed.

Future solutions

It is clear that only additional training numbers and urgent significant additional investment will address the multiple looming demands of:

- Insatiable requests for imaging
- Increased time-dependant complexity of our work
- Current vacancy rates
- Less than full-time working patterns.

This will only be achieved with full engagement and collaboration of all involved parties including the College working through its Standing Scottish Committee, NHS Education for Scotland, the Scottish Clinical Imaging Network, Shared Services and the National Radiology Implementation Board.

In conjunction with this, improved information technology (IT) with a national reporting system will help address some of the regional issues, as will overseas recruitment of consultant radiologists, if possible. IT-based solutions can only be maximised if accompanied by a parallel increase in training numbers. Increasing consultant numbers will improve the quality of the service and will be cost-effective, reducing outsourcing costs over time.

The Clinical radiology UK workforce census 2016 report was completed with a 100% response rate. To view the complete report, please see www.rcr.ac.uk/radiology/census

References

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