Clinical Radiology
The Royal College of Radiologists

Unreported X-rays, computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies: results of the September 2016 survey of Scottish NHS health boards

Main findings

The problem of unreported radiology studies continues in Scotland, with several thousands of patients waiting more than a month for the result of their X-rays and scans. It is estimated that around 7,500 patients, at any one time, are waiting 31 days or longer for their results.

Demand for radiology services is significant and continues to increase; this is compounded by insufficient numbers of consultant radiologists to cope with these demands. As a consequence, 8 of the 11 health boards (73%) covered by the survey had a backlog of radiology studies going unreported for 31 days or more, a deterioration since the previous year.

Outsourcing of reporting work to commercial teleradiology companies has contained the number of unreported studies to its present level. This comes at a significant cost to NHS Scotland; the latest RCR census estimate for 2014-15 was approximately £5.25 million – an increase of 50% on the previous year's total[1]. This figure is equivalent to the combined salaries of 60 full-time NHS consultants.

Survey question and response rate

Radiology clinical directors from 11 NHS health boards were invited to take part in a survey organised by the RCR. NHS Orkney, NHS Shetland and NHS Western Isles were excluded as they did not employ radiologists in substantive posts.

Information was requested on the following: On Thursday 1st September 2016, how many studies (plain film, CT and MRI) in your picture archiving and communications system (PACS) were unreported for:

- Between 11 and 20 days
- Between 21 and 30 days
- 31 days or more

Data submissions were received, up to 7 October 2016, from all 11 health boards – a 100% response rate.

Results

Table 1. Number of unreported radiology studies – September 2016 survey

	11–20 days	21–30 days	31 days or more
Plain film X-rays	8,263	6,460	6,426
CT	444	198	72
MRI	416	182	68
Total	**9,123**	**6,840**	**6,566**

Table 2. NHS health boards with studies going unreported for 31 days or more – September 2015 and September 2016 surveys

	Number of NHS boards	Percentage of NHS Boards
September 2015	7	64%
September 2016	8	73%

Table 3. Studies going unreported for 31 days or more – September 2015 and September 2016 surveys

	Plain film X-rays	CT	MRI	Total
September 2015	7,929	56	149	8,134
September 2016	6,426	72	68	6,566
Average (mean)	**7,178**	**64**	**109**	**7,350**

Free-text comments

Clinical directors also provided free-text comments to contextualise their data submissions for the 2016 survey. Two main themes emerged: the demand pressures faced by radiology departments and their attempts to manage these demands. Comments received (in italics):

Demand pressures

The issue of unreported x-rays…has been a problem for many years as the number of x-rays done outstrips reporting capacity. The underlying cause for this is the relentless increase in the number of cross-sectional imaging studies…

Significant pressure…consultant job plans evolve into subspecialist areas…demand of at least 40% increase in cross sectional imaging.

Managing demand

The hospital has introduced a prioritisation strategy to try to ensure the films that need to be reported are reported…urgent, GP, A and E, out-patient and in-patient. The bulk of the unreported x-rays are therefore in-patients.

Currently, all reporting sitting at seven days or less…achieved by additional in-house reporting sessions and some locum sessions…in the region of 40 additional sessions per month.

Outsourcing OOH Radiology has freed up reporting capacity but recruitment difficulties are anticipated.

One [outsourcing] company is struggling to provide contracted capacity during holiday period.

Because of Board overspend, management reluctant to spend on locum or outsourcing to clear backlog.

RCR Standing Scottish Committee, October 2016.

[1]RCR Standing Scottish Committee. The clinical radiology workforce in Scotland: 2015 census report. London: RCR, 2016 https://www.rcr.ac.uk/system/files/publication/field_publication_files/bfcr167_scotland_census.pdf