



Sustainable future for diagnostic radiology: Introduction

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Key points

- A good radiology service is essential for healthcare but there is a national shortage of radiologists and an ever-increasing demand for complex imaging.
- Patients deserve accurate and timely interpretation of their images, wherever those images are acquired. The priority for the National Health Service (NHS) is to deliver this in the most efficient and effective way.
- Opportunities exist to configure the delivery of diagnostic services in new ways and to use the existing workforce more effectively.
- This series of guidance documents suggests ways which would facilitate more flexible working with potentially greater specialisation and job satisfaction.

Overview of the series

Radiology services in the UK are facing great challenges. The pivotal role of imaging in modern clinical care has led to a relentless increase in demand, particularly for complex imaging including computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance (MR) scans, which has far outstripped the ability of current services to cope. The year-on-year average increase in activity in England has been 10.3% for CT and 12% for MR.¹

Radiologists are also faced with increasing requirements for comprehensive review of imaging within and outside multidisciplinary team meetings (MDTMs). Importantly this applies not only to patients with cancer but with other diseases as well. There has been little or no growth in capacity to carry out this function.

The UK has about 48 trained radiologists per million population, a figure which has remained almost static for the past five years. Figures from other comparable health economies include 78 in Germany, 107 in Sweden and 113 in France.²

We know from the workforce census that there are difficulties in recruiting to consultant radiologist vacancies in almost all parts of the UK. The two snapshot surveys of reporting backlogs run in October 2014 and February 2015 show increasing delays in the reporting of imaging studies, with delayed diagnosis of cancer and other serious conditions and a damaging impairment of the central role played by clinical radiologists in supporting high-quality patient care.^{3,4}

The challenges to UK radiology services include:

- Emergency imaging and timely reporting 24/7
- Cover for MDTMs and other clinical consultations
- Timely interventional radiology 24/7.

This is against the background of increasing volumes of imaging which must be considered alongside clinical information to produce an actionable report that leads to timely, optimal management of the patient. This requires failsafe, effective communication with clinical teams.

There is no single solution to these problems. An increase in training numbers is essential but will not produce immediate benefits and will not solve the current crisis of consultant radiologist recruitment, which is severe in many

parts of the UK. The purpose of this series of documents is to suggest other ways in which radiology services can be maintained, or even enhanced, in the face of the many difficulties facing the specialty.

These will include, for example:

- Making full use of radiologists who wish to work part-time
- Making full use of radiologists after retirement from permanent posts
- Enabling flexible working from home
- New service models, such as networking with other organisations for on-call, general or specialist services
- Joint appointments to more than one provider
- Teleradiology/outourcing.

Alongside the difficulties of service delivery in an undermanned service, the health of the radiologist workforce is of increasing concern. As pressure builds, the risk of burnout and other adverse health effects increases. It is our intention to promote solutions which improve the health of radiologists and reduce the likelihood of sickness absence or early retirement – a waste of our most valuable resource which we can ill afford.

The sustainable future for diagnostic radiology series of documents has been produced to:

- Identify the scope of service delivery that is required, both now and in the future
- Provide suggestions on how the gap between supply and demand might be bridged, using the current workforce in a more flexible way and in ways which promote radiologist health.

The series will be continuously updated and enhanced as developments in solutions to service provision are moving at a fast pace.

The requirements of any individual organisation will vary, as will the scope of delivery required, and it will be down to individual organisations to determine which of the above options, and in which combination, best suit the local service.

References

1. NHS England. *NHS imaging and radiodiagnostic activity in England 2012/13 release*. Leeds: NHS England, 2013.
2. The Royal College of Radiologists. *Clinical Radiology UK workforce census 2014 report*. London: The Royal College of Radiologists, 2015.
3. www.rcr.ac.uk/patients-waiting-too-long-test-results (last accessed 22/09/2015)
4. The Royal College of Radiologists. *Unreported X-rays, computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans: Results of a snapshot survey of English National Health Service (NHS) trusts*. London: The Royal College of Radiologists, 2015.

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