

Cancer Research UK briefing

Backbench Business debate on non-invasive precision therapies for cancer, July 2019

All our policy positions are developed in consultation with patients, clinicians and researchers

Introduction and overview

1. In the UK, radiotherapy plays a critical role in the treatment of many cancer patients. It can be curative or can help slow the growth of tumours and improve quality of life. It's estimated that between 40 and 50% of people diagnosed with cancer should receive radiotherapy as part of their treatment.
2. The Vision for Radiotherapy 2014-24, co-written by NHS England and Cancer Research UK, set a bold ambition for how radiotherapy services in England should evolve. Since then there has been significant progress, with the recent creation of 11 Radiotherapy Networks.
3. These networks could make a huge difference for patients: by allowing radiotherapy centres to collaborate, they could reduce variation in quality of care and improve access to innovative types of radiotherapy. **But without the right investment they won't succeed.**
4. Cancer Research UK believe Government must do the following to address the challenges facing radiotherapy in the UK:
 - **Develop a fully-funded, long-term cancer workforce plan, to address current shortages and prepare for rising demand in the future.**
 - **Introduce a mechanism for ensuring all radiotherapy machines are replaced as needed.**
 - **Provide additional funding for IT infrastructure, to allow radiotherapy centres to work together and improve care for patients.**

The radiotherapy workforce

5. There are significant shortages across the cancer workforce, including in the three key staffing groups involved in providing radiotherapy. For example, there were 70 vacant clinical oncologist posts reported across the UK in 2018, which is double the number five years ago.
6. Workforce shortages have a major impact on patients and staff. Nearly 73% of the cancer treatment workforce identified that staff shortages are a barrier to providing efficient treatments and excellent patient experience.
7. Plans to transform radiotherapy provision, and the NHS 10-year plan more broadly, must be backed with a long-term cancer workforce plan and associated investment. Without this, the NHS and Government will simply not be able to fulfil their commitments to patients.

Radiotherapy machines

8. Despite a recommendation in the 2015 Cancer Strategy, there is still no central process for replacing old radiotherapy machines.

9. In October 2016, NHS England announced a £130m investment to be spent on upgrading radiotherapy machines. This was hugely welcome: of the 260 machines in use, approximately 90 needed replacing by the end of 2017. However, this was a short-term solution. NHS England must ensure a sustainable future, so that machines are upgraded on a rolling basis, when they need to be.
10. **Additional investment in radiotherapy would be best spent on upgrading existing machines and software, rather than increasing the overall number of radiotherapy machines or centres. Even if new centres were built, it would be very difficult to find the staff to run them – not least in the absence of a long-term cancer workforce plan – especially in rural areas where staff shortages are often most severe.**

IT infrastructure

11. Without investment in IT infrastructure, efforts to join up radiotherapy services into Radiotherapy Networks will not succeed. Adequate IT infrastructure would help radiotherapy centres network, allowing more people to have their treatment closer to home as experts based in other centres oversee their treatment remotely. This infrastructure is not currently in place, so additional investment is needed.
12. A relatively small investment in IT would unlock huge potential gains – improving the quality and consistency of treatment, by allowing centres to work together. More networking could also drive efficiency, by making better use of staff time.

Facts and figures – Access in the UK

Radiotherapy is one of the mainstays of cancer treatment. It's estimated that between 40 and 50% of people diagnosed with cancer should receive radiotherapy as part of their treatment. It is very difficult to benchmark radiotherapy access in the UK because it depends on many factors, including whether people are diagnosed with cancer at an early or late stage.

There is also no robust way of judging what proportion of patients get radiotherapy in the UK right now. This is because the data does not currently include all forms of radiotherapy (such as molecular radiotherapy), or radiotherapy given in private centres. For this reason, we do not support claims that 24,000 patients are currently missing out on radiotherapy. There may indeed be an overall gap, but the data we have does not prove that this is the case.

Facts and figures – Funding in the UK

We do not have a reliable figure for how much is spent on radiotherapy in the NHS, or the UK. Comparing expenditure between different countries can be misleading, because other countries have very different health systems to the NHS.