



Summary and Comment on the Radiotherapy Dataset – Covid-19 Dashboard

Public Health England (PHE) Radiotherapy Dataset (RTDS) released today shows the true scale of the disruption to cancer radiotherapy services during the pandemic. See link - [CancerData](#)

These data are submitted monthly by all radiotherapy centres in England in a tremendous collaborative effort to report accurate digital treatment data for the NHS. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Radiotherapy has been calling for their release by PHE since early on in the pandemic.

Figures have only been released for March to July 2020 and while comparison to previous years is only provided for 2019 (2009 - 2016 figures presented elsewhere provide different base line data [RT activity across England 2017](#)), the following data is shown:

- 20% reduction in cancer patients treated in April 2020 following the first lockdown and by July this had not recovered and was still 15% down. This is over 5000 patients missing out on radiotherapy alone in the first 4 months of lockdown according to these data.
- Patients over 70 years of age were consistently more likely to miss out on treatment.
- There was a concerning variation across the country; for example, treatments had dropped by 85% in one cancer alliance for prostate cancer.
- Some tumour types were disproportionately affected; skin, cervix and rectal cancer maintained big drops in July.
- There was evidence of an increase in cancers usually treated with surgery benefiting from treatment with radiotherapy; bladder up 167% on last year.
- Worryingly the percentage of patients receiving palliative rather than curative treatment was creeping up by July.
- Front line staff had clearly worked rapidly and effectively to adapt radiotherapy practices to ensure patients could safely be given treatment during the pandemic and involved as few hospital visits as possible.

Comments

- The reduction in activity confirms feedback from front line staff submitted in the [Radiotherapy Flash Survey April 2020](#) which was presented to the Health and Social Care Select Committee in May 2020 [APPG submission](#). Front line staff in November during the second lock down still reported a reduction in patients coming through for treatment and an increase number being downgraded to palliative as delays in diagnosis mean more advanced tumours being diagnosed.
- Statements from NHSE and Government seem to suggest that the scale of the cancer backlog is unknown and that cancer services have now returned to normal levels. The RTDS should be provided more rapidly and with more detailed real time analysis to provide an accurate picture of capacity and demand within the whole of the cancer pathway. This could not only detail the cumulative cancer backlog but also make it possible to model strategies for dealing with the impact of the pandemic and ongoing need to improve cancer survival.

- Hard working front line radiotherapy staff have rapidly adapted to the disruption despite being faced with years of underinvestment, feeling undervalued and burdened with bureaucracy. The data set so far gives us a glimpse of the extent of the work that still needs to be done. The Government still needs to come forward with the full picture and an investment programme.
- Radiotherapy is needed by 50% of cancer patients and is essential in 40% of cancer cures. This data also highlights how valuable radiotherapy can be in substituting for other treatments and that it is a resilient Covid-safe treatment. Radiotherapy is extremely cost effective, with treatment costing £5-7K. Despite this, while some cancer services have received additional funding, radiotherapy is still waiting and continues to be overlooked.

Catch up with Cancer Team

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