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Letter

Flash Survey on the Effect of COVID-19 on Radiotherapy Services in the UK – the Benefit of Social Media for Rapid Information Gathering for the Radiotherapy Community and Government



Madam — The charity Action Radiotherapy [1] undertook a digital flash survey between 24 and 27 April 2020 to assess the impact of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) COVID-19 guidelines [2] from 28 March 2020 on the UK radiotherapy service. The findings formed part of a submission by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Radiotherapy [3] to the Health and Social Care Select Committee inquiry into ‘Delivering core NHS and care services during the pandemic and beyond’ [4]. Using Google Forms to conduct the survey, 324 responses from UK radiotherapy professionals were analysed and the results widely distributed within 3 days [5]. The charity had communicated daily COVID-19 literature updates since the start of lockdown, so multiprofessional engagement was high, with about 4000 Twitter followers and 1314 daily news subscribers.

The survey allowed departments to rapidly share information and it was evident that there were a range of interpretations of the NICE guidelines. The survey showed that the pandemic has accelerated some of the problems the service was already facing. Almost a quarter of respondents reported that IT infrastructure was less than adequate for remote working, planning and networking. This is despite radiotherapy being one of the most high-tech medical specialities and ‘off the shelf’ solutions being available from industry to deliver efficient, fast and remote patient care and follow-up, minimising nosocomial and staff cross-infection.

The workforce felt very strongly that the Government and senior NHS professionals did not understand the impact COVID-19 had on the workforce or on cancer patients, and radiotherapy was undervalued. Given that radiotherapy appears near the top of all prioritisation recommendations for cancer care, the radiotherapy service under the current pressure needs to be fully understood by policy makers.

Requests have now been made to rapidly address the deficiencies in the radiotherapy service to deal with the forthcoming cancer backlog and future radiotherapy service needs for the post-COVID crisis phase.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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