

RCP briefing for oral health and social care questions | 19 July 2022

The secretary of state's appointment comes at a time when NHS staff are under ongoing pressure as they work to try and reduce the backlog of diagnostics and elective care, while continuing to provide urgent and emergency care. There are now a record 6.61 million people waiting for care. [Some forecasts suggest](#) this could hit over 10 million by 2024.

Workforce continues to be a limiting factor in bringing down waiting lists and delivering the government's wider ambitions for health and care. [New figures published](#) by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) reveal more than half (52%) of advertised consultant physician posts in England and Wales went unfilled in 2021. This is the highest rate of unfilled posts since records began in 2008. Of the 52% that went unfilled in 2021, the majority (74%) were unfilled due to a lack of any applicants at all.

Mr Barclay's appointment also comes at a critical moment in efforts to tackle health inequality. **The over 200 the member organisations of the [Inequalities in Health Alliance](#), convened by the RCP, hope the new secretary of state will heed calls for a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities.** The health disparities white paper must be published this year as planned, laying out clear plans for cross-government action with an equal focus on tackling the wider determinants of health; behavioural factors; and access and outcomes to health services.

The NHS workforce and waiting lists

Workforce continues to be a limiting factor in bringing down waiting lists and the government's wider ambitions for health and care. [New figures published](#) by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) yesterday revealed more than half (52%) of advertised consultant physician posts in England and Wales went unfilled in 2021. This is the highest rate of unfilled posts since records began in 2008. Of the 52% that went unfilled in 2021, the majority (74%) were unfilled due to a lack of any applicants at all.

NHS waiting lists for diagnostic and elective care currently stand at 6.61 million, while primary and urgent and emergency care are both facing their highest ever demand. While in May 2022 the NHS performed its highest ever number of diagnostic tests for that month, A&E attendances and emergency ambulance call-outs were the highest they have ever been for any June on record. Demand continues to rise – and workforce is the barrier to meeting it. The [NHS Staff Survey 2021](#), published in March 2022, found that over half (52%) of NHS frontline staff felt that they could not do their jobs properly because of a shortage of staff. [According to the 2021 RCP census](#), 45% of consultants said they work excessive hours or have an excessive workload 'almost always' or 'most of the time'.

Sir Andrew Goddard, the president of the Royal College of Physicians, [said in response](#) to the latest performance figures from NHS England:

"Lack of beds explains some of this collapse, but it is lack of workforce both in health and social care which is the main cause. There is only so much that staff working in under-resourced teams can do when met with rising

demand for services. What we're all crying out for is more staff...This isn't a problem that is going to go away without a clear workforce strategy."

It takes time to train a doctor, so we have to act now to feel the benefit in future. [The Office for National Statistics \(ONS\) estimates that](#), by 2040, there will be 17 million people in the UK over the age of 65. At the same time, the RCP census estimates that 44% of current consultant physicians will reach retirement age in the next 10 years (taking an average retirement age of 62–63 years).

More physicians are also training and working less than full time. In July 2021, the majority of trainees (56%) [said that they were interested in working less than full time](#). The number of female consultants is also steadily increasing, with the new census data indicating that women now make up 39% of the overall consultant physician workforce. While a large majority of both men and women work full time until their mid-30s, the trends then diverge, with 42% of women aged 35–44 working less than full time compared with 6% of men. These are challenges that we can choose to be prepared for if we take action now.

A long-term 15-year workforce strategy was commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care at the start of 2022, with the expectation that it would be published by NHS England by the end of this year. **The new secretary of state must make workforce a priority and commit to deliver this strategy by the end of this year as originally planned** with a range of measures to grow, train and retain a healthcare workforce – including expanding the number of medical school places – to ensure the long-term sustainability of the NHS.

Health inequalities

Before COVID-19, the gap in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest areas was around 19 years. **Tackling health inequalities and bringing forward the Health Disparities White Paper (HDWP) this year as planned must also be a priority for the new secretary of state for health and social care.** The RCP will assess the HDWP on the extent to which it lays out clear cross-government action and has an equal focus on the wider determinants of health, behavioural factors, and access and outcomes.

It may seem that health inequality is a matter for the DHSC and the NHS, but health and social care services can only try and cure ailments created by the environments people live in. If we are to prevent physical and mental ill health in the first place, we need to act on issues such as poor housing, food quality, communities and place, employment, racism and discrimination, transport and air pollution. **That is why the [Inequalities in Health Alliance \(IHA\)](#), a group of over 200 organisations convened by the RCP, is calling for a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities.** Tackling these inequalities is a key part of reducing demand on the NHS, and ensuring people live healthier lives.

Questions for the Minister

- What assessment has the secretary of state made of the need to increase the number of medical school places?
- Can the secretary of state confirm when the long-term workforce strategy commissioned by the Department will be published?
- Will the secretary of state commit to bringing forward the Health Disparities White Paper this year as planned, and what assessment has he made of a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities?