

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LOCUM JOBS IN THE UK

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The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on the NHS in terms of delays for routine hospital admissions and longer waiting lists for patients. Now, as the vaccine helps life get back to normal, the health service is aiming to reduce waiting times for surgeries and other appointments, with locum staff playing a key role in its recovery.

The demand for healthcare workers in the UK is set to increase over the course of 2021 and beyond, as the NHS makes efforts to see the [record](#) 4.7 million people on waiting lists for treatment. Routine hospital admissions are down by 47% compared with one year ago, as people have avoided making an appointment due to their fear of coronavirus.

Now this is set to change, as more people feel safe about making a routine appointment again. The anticipated surge in appointments will lead to an increase in the number of locum jobs as the government strives to get UK healthcare back on track.

This will present opportunities for locum staff looking for work in the UK, where a high demand for skilled healthcare workers is set to begin, with lots of jobs available.

The drying up of the previously reliable supply lines of healthcare staff - including Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians and overseas locums - has exacerbated supply issues and backlogs. Globe will continue to draw on our global pipeline of healthcare professionals to bridge the shortage gap.

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Summary

The White Paper will look at the current challenges facing the health service in the UK and will consider ways that locums can play an essential role in rebuilding healthcare following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Longer waiting lists

According to NHS England data, more than 387,000 people had already waited more than 52 weeks to start treatment by February 2021 - the highest figure since December 2007. The number of people suffering a long-term wait was only 1,613 in February 2020, revealing the true extent of how the pandemic had affected health in the UK.

In February 2021, hospitals only admitted 152,62 people for routine hospital treatment, compared with 285,918 one year earlier. Head of policy at Macmillan Cancer Support Sara Bainbridge has described how the data illustrates the "catastrophic impact" of Covid-19.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said the [massive backlog](#) of 4.7 million people could be tackled, adding it is a "real priority". He pledged that the government would ensure the NHS had the necessary funds to tackle the waiting lists.

Data from NHS England revealed 400,000 Covid-19 patients had been treated in hospital during the past year - which had "inevitably" impacted on the NHS. During the winter virus surge, 1.9 million elective procedures or patient support appointments took place, while the NHS logged a massive 2.6 million visits to A&E.

Mr Johnson said the government had already pumped an extra £92 billion into the NHS in the past year, adding it shouldn't be a case of choosing between Covid-19 care or cancer care.

Cancer diagnosis delays

People have been delaying going to their GP with potentially urgent medical conditions due to fears of contracting coronavirus. This included people with possibly life-threatening conditions, such as cancer. In February 2021, only 174,624 cancer referrals were made by GPs, compared with 190,369 for the same period in 2020.

This represented a year-on-year fall of 8%. In January 2021, there was a year-on-year fall in referrals of 11%. For breast cancer symptoms, urgent referrals dropped by 10% in February 2021, compared with 12 months ago.

In February 2021, 327,663 patients were waiting more than six weeks for key diagnostic tests, such as MRI scans, compared with 571,459 in May 2020. Some 22,000 patients started cancer treatment in February.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to the 18-week waiting time for an appointment being exceeded. This factor put the maximum wait time of 18 weeks in place in 2007. However, the number of people waiting for more than 18 weeks in July 2020 was also the highest since records began, standing at 2.15 million.

Data showed only 46.8% of patients were treated within 18 weeks, compared with the 92% treated before the pandemic. The average wait for an appointment for treatment with a hospital consultant increased to 19.6 weeks in July 2020.

Potential two-year wait for surgery

Sir David Nicholson, chairman of Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, has called the backlog "truly frightening". The former CEO of the National Health Service in England believes patients could be waiting for up to two years for operations as a result of the pandemic.

He says the current issue of access to care is a more severe threat to the NHS than privatisation, adding that taxpayers are losing confidence in the service's ability to deliver.

The chief of the health service between 2006 until 2014, Mr Nicholson, fears the number of people waiting for hospital treatment could be as high as 6.9 million by the end of 2021. This includes figures from the "hidden waiting list" - the people who have put off seeking medical help, even though they have symptoms of an illness.

As the Covid-19 surge begins to abate, the people who have symptoms of an illness or medical problem could be spurred into finally visiting their GP - causing a sudden surge in numbers on the waiting lists.

Mr Nicholson said the number of people waiting for more than 28 days for urgent heart or cancer surgery has also risen. He fears the "priority two" or "P2" patients are under threat of their health significantly worsening, such as cancer becoming inoperable, if their treatment doesn't take place within the 28-day time frame.

Operations such as these were postponed during the second coronavirus wave during winter 2020. Mr Nicholson said he had dealt with waiting list problems in the past during his career, but never before had these urgent patients had to wait longer than 28 days.

"That is a big, big, big issue," he said, pointing out that P2 patients needed to be treated within the time frame or may suffer irreversible harm.

"Frightening" backlog of operations

President of the Royal College of Surgeons of England Neil Mortensen has backed Mr Nicholson's warnings, saying the stark picture of backlogs for NHS surgery and other elective treatments was "frightening". He is calling on the NHS to complete the most urgent planned surgery and look after Covid-19 patients.

However, he fears the longer the disruption continues, the worse the waiting lists for surgery will become until NHS services can return to normal. He is calling for a well-funded and clear plan to deal with the backlog as a matter of urgency.

With one in 12 people in England now on a waiting list for medical treatment of some kind, as lockdown restrictions start to ease, this number may rise as people feel safer about seeking NHS help again.

Current shortages of healthcare staff in the UK

NHS hospitals, mental health services and community healthcare providers are suffering a shortage of almost 84,000 staff, according to the latest figures. This is severely affecting key services and groups, such as nurses, health visitors and midwives.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted how staff are working under enormous strain as a result of [employee shortages](#). While the NHS Long Term Plan pointed to the need to address these shortages, a detailed workforce plan still has to be put in place.

A number of subsequent reports have highlighted the need for urgent action, with locums playing a key role in measures to reduce the waiting lists as quickly as possible.

Opportunity for locums post-lockdown

By the nature of their flexibility, locum staff look set to play a significant role in allowing the NHS to continue to operate in this time of crisis and catch up with the backlog. Many agency workers are doctors and nurses who come from overseas to work for the NHS, such as Europe, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

However, this supply has dried up during the lockdown due to travel restrictions. Many workers have felt concerned about working overseas due to the pandemic.

The steady rise to peak demand for healthcare services is starting now due to the gradual relaxation of the lockdown restrictions and the start of the summer holidays, which is often busy for the NHS.

In addition, overstretched NHS staff - who have constantly been working during the pandemic due to travel and holidays being banned - are putting in annual leave requests. This will lead to an even greater increase in locum jobs to ensure the UK's healthcare standards can meet targets and get back on track.

The number of vacancies is set to increase as employed healthcare staff resume their pre-pandemic plans in taking a break, pursuing a new job, or even moving industries.

Growing demand for locums to reduce waiting lists

Locum services are ever popular, and the latest trend indicates growing demand. The increase will be in line with the number of people returning to their GP to report a new health problem. It will also relate to the number of patients on waiting lists.

Locums will play a key role in ensuring the NHS doesn't become swamped and fall further behind. They will also make a significant impact when it comes to reducing the waiting lists - particularly for urgent operations and treatment - to bring the waiting times back within their targets.

In addition, services that have ceased due to social distancing - such as services in pharmacies - will gradually start to resume. This will necessitate a boost for locum jobs in this sector, too, as normal service delivery resumes. Employers will be keen to book locums that can deliver services to compensate for the time lost during the pandemic.

It is anticipated further shifts will be available for locum healthcare staff in all fields as the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine continues and life starts to return to normal.

More locum jobs

Surveys have revealed that waiting times do matter to the public. A long wait for treatment is one of the most common reasons people express dissatisfaction with the NHS. If post-pandemic waiting times continue to move in the wrong direction, it could turn into a political disaster for the government.

This is something Boris Johnson will be keen to avoid. Fears have already been voiced that

a lot of staff - already exhausted from working throughout the pandemic - may throw in the towel if waiting lists continue to move in the wrong direction.

This would create more locum jobs if large numbers of NHS staff took a break - temporarily or permanently - on the back of the pandemic. There are currently between 42,000 and 60,000 locum GPs in the UK, according to the National Association of Sessional GPs.

They play a vital role in the GP workforce, carrying out around 80 million NHS consultations annually. It is anticipated there will be an increase in the recruitment of locum GPs and Primary Care clinical staff, such as practice nurses, as healthcare services return to normal.

Radiography locums will be required to fill roles in various disciplines, including diagnostic, therapeutic, cardiac, CT and MRI radiography, mammography and applications specialist jobs.

Other skilled jobs include sonography locums, who are skilled at using ultrasound waves to look inside the body. Sonographers carry out ultrasound imaging and diagnosis, mostly in real time, producing images and interpreting their observations. They then write their report for the patient's referring clinician.

Radiology locums will also be required to carry out a broad spectrum of duties, including in a diagnostic speciality capacity, or in an interventional speciality role. Locums working in radiography jobs come into contact with a broad spectrum of different departments across the hospital and will have experiences in a range of disciplines.

Benefits of becoming a locum

Becoming a locum gives you more control over your career. It's up to you to decide what type of contract you will sign up for, whether you're looking for short-term work where you have more flexibility to move around, or a longer-term job where you can gain experience and increase your skills in one place.

Using a specialist recruitment agency is a preferred option to ensure the nurses and other staff required for temporary cover have the current skills and experience in the required fields. Such as chronic disease management, child health - including immunisations and vaccinations - cervical cytology, travel health and wound care.

The government, the NHS and other healthcare service providers are working together to ensure patients across the UK receive the best possible healthcare as soon as possible, with tackling NHS waiting lists a priority.

Globe's plan

Globe has a global pipeline of healthcare professionals to bridge the shortage gap in skilled healthcare workers in the UK. We aim to ensure our locum workforce remains robust and flexible at all times, allowing us to help the NHS with their areas of need.

Looking to the future, where areas of shortage in Allied Health and Nursing are anticipated, we will continue to invest in sourcing new healthcare locums for the future.

Conclusion

While the current shortage of health workers, combined with the post-pandemic waiting lists, is serious, it is not insurmountable. An increase in locums in the immediate future can help bridge the shortages of NHS staff in various departments, from specialists to nurses.

Globe Locums is a specialist healthcare recruitment agency, offering a tailored service for locums and permanent job seekers, both in the UK and around the world. Please >contact us for more information about our professional services.

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