

Priorities for the next UK Government

The Royal College of Physicians plays a leading role in the delivery of high quality patient care by setting standards of medical practice, promoting clinical excellence and providing physicians with education, training and support throughout their careers. An independent body representing over 20,000 Fellows and Members in the UK and overseas, across 29 medical specialties, the College advises and works with Government, the public, patients and other healthcare professions to improve health and the delivery of healthcare. The College is a registered charity and a non-political organisation.

The College would like to see fuller participation of doctors, patients and the public in health strategy, policy development and implementation. The College is calling on the next UK Government to implement policies within four key areas:

- Improving the health of individuals
- Developing the best care for patients
- Improving the working lives of doctors
- Restoring academic medicine.

Improving the health of individuals

The College has played a leading role in addressing public health concerns for much of the past fifty years, most notably in the area of tobacco control. The College is calling for policies that will not only improve health but will also reduce health inequalities:

A comprehensive ban on smoking in all public places and workplaces

This would go a long way to prevent uptake of smoking by young people and would encourage complete cessation in current smokers able to quit. A ban combined with other measures would significantly lessen the current burden of ill health and mortality caused by smoking.

Funding for dedicated alcohol health workers

Acute hospitals have to deal with an increasing number of patients affected by alcohol abuse. As part of a larger coherent alcohol strategy the College would like to see funding made available for dedicated alcohol health workers in A&E departments.

A comprehensive national strategy for tackling the threat from overweight and obesity

The College believes a cross-governmental task force should be established at Cabinet level to develop national strategies for tackling the threat from overweight and obesity, and to oversee the implementation of these strategies. The College would also like to see a sustained public education campaign and new standards in nutritional content, food labelling and food marketing.

A reduction in the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases

The College believes that the provision of high quality integrated sexual health services and the implementation of screening programmes for chlamydia trachomatis for all at-risk groups could ultimately lead to a reduction in the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases.

Developing the best care for patients

Patients are at the heart of the work of this College; everything the College does is aimed at serving them well. The College is calling for:

The promotion and strengthening of clinical leadership in the NHS

There is clear evidence that involving doctors in the hospital decision-making process through strong clinical leadership at the point of service delivery is a sure means of improving the quality of care.

Continued expansion of the medical workforce

There is a need for more consultants. More National Training Numbers (NTNs) are required to allow enough doctors to enter specialist training.

A new specialty of acute medicine

At present most acute medicine is delivered by physicians who combine this work with other kinds of specialist care. This is not ideal, as very ill patients need the undivided attention of the teams caring for them. The new specialty of acute medicine should form the axis around which acute services and facilities are developed.

Better coordination of services across primary and secondary care

As the population ages, a large part of healthcare lies in the effective management of long-term conditions and, particularly, in facilitating and supporting the self-management of chronic illness. This can best be achieved with new models of service provision, led by healthcare professionals across primary and secondary care and in partnership with patients and the organisations that represent them. Engagement of both primary and secondary care clinicians in the commissioning process will be fundamental to making progress.

Closer involvement of the medical profession in standard setting and performance assessment

The medical profession has extensive experience in setting standards of care for many different conditions. The College believes that the medical profession should be consulted on the development of all standards for healthcare practice.

Dedicated time for professional training

It is essential that physicians have time allocated for developing their own continuing professional development in order that they can provide the most appropriate and up-to-date care for patients in a modern NHS.

An increase in the number of properly staffed medical beds

An increase in the number of beds for medical patients will allow them to be seen more quickly and reduce waiting lists. The additional beds need to be staffed appropriately which the College believes can be managed using the existing mix of medical professionals.

Improving the working lives of doctors

To enable doctors to work more effectively in the best interests of patients, in order to maintain standards for care, the College is calling for:

Greater support for flexible ways of working within hospitals

The introduction of the European Working Time Directive has restricted the working hours of junior doctors and has led to requirements for new ways of working, with changes to the shifts and skillmix within hospitals; these changes have highlighted the need for improved arrangements for childcare. In addition, there is a need to offer more flexible work patterns for senior clinicians, including part-time working and job sharing in order to keep them in the medical workforce.

Improved medical career structures

With the increasing pressure on doctors' workloads there should be more done to encourage consultants to stay within the NHS, and to retain their clinical and teaching skills and experience. In addition, it is important that the non-consultant grade is standardised in order that there is consistency across the profession and standards of care are maintained.

Restoring academic medicine

For many years there have been difficulties in recruiting and retaining clinical academics, and funding for academic posts has been reduced. This is happening at a time when medical student numbers are increasing. If this situation continues, not only will there be fewer clinical academics to teach junior doctors, but the drop in capacity for medical research will affect the standard of patient care. The College is calling for a coherent strategy for the development of academic medicine in the UK.