

The Anaesthesia Workforce

The RCoA performed a census in 2015, collecting data on anaesthetic workforce across the UK. Figure 1 from that report shows the age profile for anaesthetic consultants. As 95% retire by the age of 60, we can predict that around 280 consultants will retire and need to be replaced each year until 2035. Additional consultants will also be required to meet the demands of an increasing surgical, intensive care medicine and pain management etc workload. This rise in demand is difficult to predict, but based on past history and future predictions is likely to be between 2-5% (refs: RCoA census 2007 & 2015, CfWI 2015). If we combine the number of retirees with the increased demand from specialty growth, we can predict that there will need to be a pipeline supply of between 430 to 650 new anaesthetists per year. Over the last 5 years, the number of ST3s starting in anaesthesia has averaged 340. Even if all of these doctors complete their training, this will leave anaesthesia with a significant and increasing shortfall. Is there any evidence that this is happening?

The RCoA holds a nominal role of Clinical Directors in anaesthesia. This e-mail list has been used to electronically survey Clinical Directors about workforce and recruitment issues. The last survey in November 2018 received 145 completed responses which represented complete data from 86% of Trusts in the UK. Table 1 shows the numbers of different non-trainee staff groups. Based on 2015 census data, this is likely to represent in excess of 70% of the consultants in the UK.

The survey responses showed that 75% of departments have at least one unfilled consultant post, with a total of 411 unfilled consultant posts across our sample, which represents a consultant gap of 6.9%. This is a progression from the 2015 census where the gap was 4.4% and the 2017 Clinical Director survey where the gap had increased to 5.2% (Table 2).

Of the unfilled consultant posts, 70 were in intensive care medicine, 60 were general duties and 30 were in obstetric anaesthesia.

The situation is similar for SAS doctor posts who, in our sample, made up 16.7% of the non-trainee workforce. In 2018, there were 276 unfilled SAS posts, representing a gap of 18.9%. If we combine the unfilled consultant and SAS doctor posts, we can see that 9.3% of non-trainee posts are unfilled.

The survey shows that Physicians Assistants make up only 1.2% of the non-trainee workforce, and are significantly under-represented in some of the devolved nations. More than 80% of departments had no plans to recruit PAAs as they felt they wouldn't be useful in their departments, couldn't support the out of hours acute workload and there was no budget to employ them. In addition, some Clinical Directors cited lack of availability as a reason for not employing PAAs.

Clinical Directors reported that 274 (5%) of consultants had retired in the last 2 years. Around half of these individuals return to work for a limited period.

In terms of recruitment, 48% of Trusts have advertised a consultant post but been unable to fill it. The most common reasons why departments couldn't fill jobs were reported as a lack of applicants (34%) and lack of qualified applicants (35%).

The overall picture from these data suggests that we are under-producing new anaesthetists to meet the increasing demand, which is leading to an increasing workforce shortfall.

Figure 1

Consultant age profile (data from RCoA census 2015)

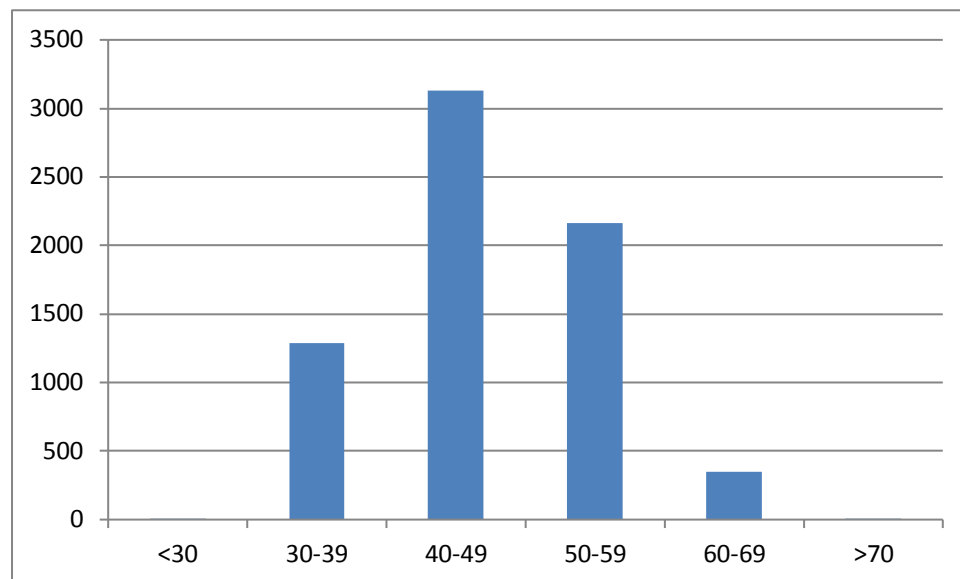


Table 1

Numbers of non-trainee staff groups (data from RCoA Clinical Director survey 2018)

Role	Number (%)
Consultant	5558 (78.4)
SAS doctors	1185 (16.7)
PAAAs	88 (1.2)
Locum Consultants	256 (3.6)

Table 2

Anaesthetic Consultant gap

Source	Consultant gap
2015 RCoA workforce census	4.4%
2017 RCoA Clinical Director survey	5.2%
2018 RCoA Clinical Director survey	6.9%

Table 3

	England	Scotland	Wales	NI
Consultants	4781	493	224	60
SAS	1031	71	68	15
PAAAs	73	15	0	0
Locum consultant (% consultants)	224 (4.5)	20 (3.9)	9 (3.9)	3 (4.8)
Depts with unfilled consultant posts	76%	71%	83%	66%
Advertised post but unable to fill	44%	71%	67%	0
Consultant gap	358	34	16	3
	7.0%	6.5%	6.7%	4.8%
SAS gap	254	6	9	7
	19.8%	7.8%	11.7%	31.8%
Retirement (% consultants)	235 (4.9)	25 (5.1)	10 (4.5)	4 (6.7)