

# Royal College of Psychiatrists' briefing | COVID 19 and Mental Health April 2020



A survey by the College has found that Psychiatrists are being forced to put themselves and their patients at risk, delivering care without adequate PPE or access to tests for themselves, their families or their patients<sup>i</sup>.

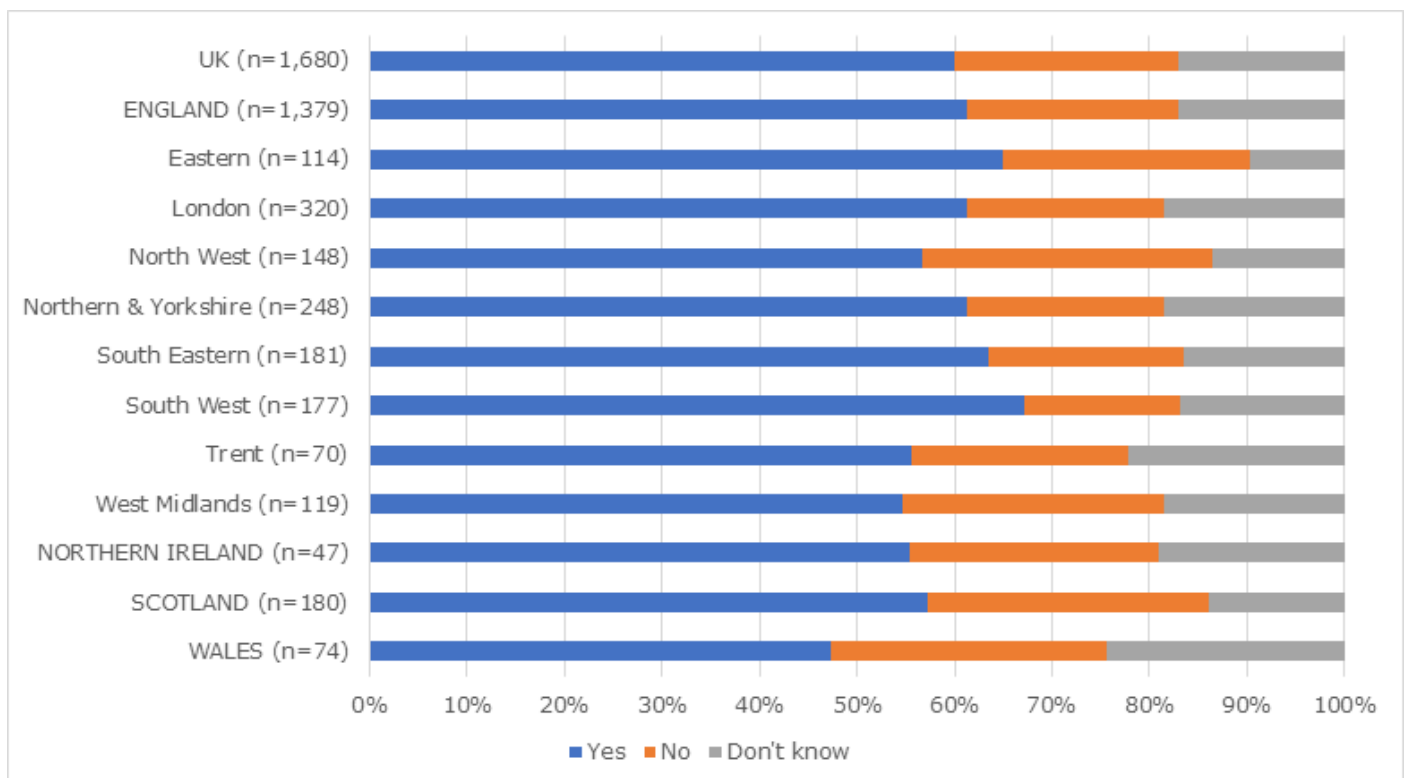
One Psychiatrist surveyed said "There are extreme shortages of PPE and most of us are at risk. Only very limited supply is obtained and most of the time frontline staff are refused risking their lives. Staff are terrified and afraid."

## Personal Protection Equipment PPE

Our survey has shown that a significant proportion of psychiatrists are concerned that they are not able to access the [level of PPE set out in the guidance](#).

- Nearly one in four (23%) psychiatrists in the UK don't have access to correct PPE.
- In Scotland this was 29%, Wales 28%, Northern Ireland 26% and 22% in England.

The regional breakdown is as follows:



Many of our members have to work in old buildings unsuitable for keeping patients with COVID-19 isolated with 1,176 patients having to share mixed dormitories<sup>ii</sup>. Some of our members have expressed concerns about the potential impact the lack of adequate PPE is likely to have. Some of the worst responses to our survey included members saying that:

- "Last week we did CPR on a patient who had hung themselves with no fit tested PPE."

- *"There are extreme shortages of PPE and most of us are at risk. Only very limited supply is obtained and most of the time frontline staff are refused risking their lives. Staff are terrified and afraid."*
- *"Spitting in Covid positive patients is a real issue and not able to get the appropriate PPE, social distancing impossible in inpatient settings."*

### **Access to testing**

The other major concern raised by our members is that they were unable to access tests for themselves, their families or their patients if they have concerns if they have COVID-19. The current Government guidance states that any NHS worker or their family member with suspected COVID-19 should be able to access testing and that tests should be given to anyone with suspected symptoms in an inpatient setting. When our members across the UK were surveyed (15-17<sup>th</sup> April) we found that:

- Only half of psychiatrists confirm they can access testing kits for themselves (51%)
- Only 54% were able to access tests for their patients if they suspected COVID-19
- Less than one in three (30%) confirmed they can obtain tests for members of their household.

These findings match the research by NHS Providers who found that mental health leaders felt that they were significantly disadvantaged in the process of accessing tests<sup>iii</sup>.

### **Mental Health Services are more needed than ever during the CV crisis**

It's critical that people know that NHS mental health services are still open. Our members in the front line are reporting significant reductions in patient referrals – especially in child and adolescent services. Those who fail to get the help they need now, will inevitably become more seriously ill. This is particularly concerning for deadly mental health conditions such as Eating Disorders, which have a higher mortality rate than many cancers. The College is also monitoring early signs that child and adolescent suicide rates may have risen since the lock-down began.

Many mental health providers reacted quickly to change the way services act in response for the crisis. Our survey found that **around a quarter** (24%) of members are currently working an 'altered timetable due to reconfiguration of services'.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that those who use mental health services continue to get the care they need. Remote consultations, using telephone calls, audio and video will be become far more widespread and there are moves to exponentially increase capacity for this in the coming weeks.

From our survey we have found that **around 17% of Psychiatrists are currently working remotely** which may involve remote consultations with patients

The College has [published online](#) resources for people with a mental illness and their carers on issues such as medication and how to manage their conditions during the crisis.

## **How we can support the mental health of NHS and other frontline workers**

The RCPsych has acted swiftly to support members with their own wellbeing and has published [resources](#) to help.

Our advice, compiled by international experts on trauma, explains the crucial role that employers need to play in leading and facilitating honest conversations with staff to enable them to deal with the inevitable emotional response to the very difficult situations they are facing every day.

## **How we can we support people's mental health after the initial peak?**

It seems inevitable that once the pandemic is past its peak, there will be an increase in demand for mental health services. This is because of pent up demand caused by the fall in referrals now and by the consequences of lockdown, economic uncertainty and the trauma of contracting or losing loved ones to Covid-19. We expect an increase in people suffering from anxiety or other conditions such as PTSD. There is strong evidence that financial difficulties are linked to higher levels of mental health problems, so the economic effects of the lockdown are likely to further exacerbate problems<sup>iv</sup>.

Mental health services, which are overstretched at the best of times, will come under even more pressure. One of the biggest causes of this is a lack of trained staff. To meet the promises already made for mental health care, reduce vacancies and cover retirements we need an additional [4,370 consultant psychiatrists by 2029](#). The recent census by the Royal College of Psychiatrists showed the rate of unfilled NHS consultant psychiatrist posts in England has doubled in the last six years.

It is important that the commitments made in the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health and the NHS Long Term Plan are not forgotten. Between them they promised significant increased investment in mental health services which would make a big impact on the lives of many patients. While some targets are bound to be missed this year as services struggle to cope with COVID-19 we will need to redouble our efforts to make sure we get back on track.

## **Questions for the Minister**

- What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the nearly one in four (23%) psychiatrists who have reported not having access to the correct PPE are properly protected from COVID-19
- Will the Government commit to follow the advice of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and others to double the number of places in UK medical schools so that we are better equipped to look after both the physical and mental health needs of the nation?
- Will the Government guarantee that after this crisis is over mental health services are not forgotten and every effort is taken to get back on track in transforming mental health services as laid out in the NHS Long Term Plan?
- Will the Minister assure the House that the Government's pledge to do everything in its power to support the NHS respond to Covid19 includes the mental health effects? Some of which may arise in weeks, months or even years. And that the services to meet these needs will get sufficient funding?

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<sup>i</sup> The Royal College of Psychiatrists issued a survey to its members working in the National Health Service across the United Kingdom. It was in the field from Wednesday 15 April until the morning of Friday 17 April. 1,685 completed responses were received out from across the UK of a total available sample of c12,900, which equates to a response rate of 13%. This includes 1,384 from among members based in England.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.hsj.co.uk/finance-and-efficiency/exclusive-hundreds-of-patients-kept-in-distressing-dormitory-style-wards/7025290.article>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://nhsproviders.org/confronting-coronavirus-in-the-nhs/3-pinch-points-and-problems-and-dealing-with-them>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-poverty>