Cancer Research UK position on radiotherapy services in Wales

**Overarching position**
Cancer Research UK (CR-UK) wants all cancer patients to have access to the best, evidence-based treatment for their condition. This includes access to modern radiotherapy techniques, such as Intensity Modulated Radiotherapy, that are more targeted and reduce side effects for patients.

**Summary**
This paper presents CR-UK’s policy priorities for improving radiotherapy services in Wales to ensure all cancer patients have access to the best, evidenced-based treatment for their condition. We would like these priorities to be considered by the Welsh Government and other key stakeholders as the refresh of the Cancer Delivery Plan is developed.

**Recommendations for improving radiotherapy services:**
1. The Welsh Government should ensure greater national co-ordination and planning of the radiotherapy service to support better access and address variation in access.
2. The Welsh Government should set clear ambitions for patient access to modern radiotherapy treatments, including the proportion of cancer patients who should receive radiotherapy and that 50% of radiotherapy patients receiving curative treatment get IMRT.
3. The Welsh Government should develop and implement a clear workforce strategy for the radiotherapy service. There should be specific focus and resource given to meet recruitment challenges faced by services in the West of the country.
4. Through better national co-ordination the Welsh Government should ensure equal distribution of new equipment across geographical areas.
5. The Welsh Government should build on work to collect data, and ensure Wales has a robust national dataset for radiotherapy that captures and reports on patient access to all types of radiotherapy treatments, and allows for comparability across the UK.
6. The Welsh Government should consider how to better embed research across the whole radiotherapy service, including how to increase participation in clinical trials, and how to ensure dedicated staff time and linear accelerator time for research purposes.
7. We would encourage the Welsh Government to support the work of the Radiotherapy Awareness Programme in showcasing the innovative nature of radiotherapy to cancer patients and the wider public.

**Context**
Cancer survival in the UK has doubled over the last 40 years, with 1 in 2 people now surviving cancer for 10 years or more. CR-UK has an ambition to accelerate that progress and get to 3 in 4 patients surviving cancer within the next 20 years.

In Wales, 19,100 people were diagnosed with Cancer in 2014. Cancer survival is improving in Wales, with just over 70% of people diagnosed now living for one year, and five year survival at 54%. However, survival rates vary significantly across cancer types, with pancreatic and liver cancer and acute myeloid leukaemia proving the lowest with relative one-year survival rates of less than 30%. Ensuring patients get the best, evidence-based radiotherapy treatment will be a vital part to achieving improved survival and is therefore a priority for CR-UK.

Radiotherapy can cure cancer, is cutting-edge and is cost effective. It is second only to surgery in its effectiveness in treating cancer, and experts suggest around 4 in 10 patients whose cancer is cured receive radiotherapy. It has become significantly more sophisticated over the past decade, providing treatment which is more targeted and reduces side effects that patients may experience. Over the
coming years, research will bring even more ways to refine and develop new radiotherapy techniques that will be beneficial for patients.

Since 2012 the Welsh Government’s Cancer Delivery Plan (CDP) has guided cancer services, however this strategy will come to an end in 2016. Its successor is currently being developed and it’s critical that the Welsh government capitalises on this opportunity to consider all elements of cancer services, including radiotherapy, and where improvements should be made.

To inform the development of the new CDP, CR-UK recently published ‘Where next for cancer services in Wales? An evaluation of priorities to improve patient care’. This report included recommendations on radiotherapy services. These recommendations along with further consultation with leaders in the radiotherapy service have informed the development of this paper.

1. **Greater national co-ordination**

Strong leadership at the national level is vital to ensure the right configuration of services and funding is made available to provide equal patient access to radiotherapy. Leadership at national and local level is also important to overcome challenges in providing modern radiotherapy techniques. At the moment we are aware that individual centres are able to co-ordinate and implement modern radiotherapy techniques at a local level. Nevertheless there is clear acknowledgement that variation in practice still exists and stronger national leadership is needed to better co-ordinate and implement access to the best, radiotherapy techniques across the country.

**Recommendation 1: The Welsh Government should ensure greater national co-ordination and planning of the radiotherapy service to support better access and address variation in access.**

2. **Equal access to modern radiotherapy techniques**

International modelling indicates that around 50% of cancer patients should receive radiotherapy as part of their treatment. However, modelling in England suggests access should be around 40.6%. The debate continues about what the optimal access rate should be – and this is the same for Wales. Previous reports have indicated that around 37% of Welsh cancer patients receive radiotherapy as part of their treatment plan. However this figure is now out dated (from 2007), and at present it is not clear what percentage of cancer patients are receiving radiotherapy.

We are aware that radiotherapy centres have been asked to undertake an urgent review of the levels of attendances for their population, to determine the appropriate service model to meet future demands. By 2020 Local Health Boards across Wales should be able to provide a total of 183,300 attendances per year. In 2011/12 approximately 90,957 attendances were recorded, showing demand is to more than double by the end of the decade.

Modern radiotherapy techniques such as Intensity Modulated Radiotherapy (IMRT), Image Guided Radiotherapy (IGRT) and Stereotactic Ablative Radiotherapy (SABR) are more targeted and reduce side effects. Newer techniques are also reducing the number of times patients have to travel for treatment, which is better for the patient and more efficient for the NHS.

CR-UK believes that:

- Around 50% of radical radiotherapy patient cases should receive IMRT as part of their treatment.
- All radiotherapy patients should receive IGRT as appropriate for their treatment.
- There should be equal access to new, evidence-based technologies including SABR, proton beam therapy and brachytherapy.
Recommendation 2: The Welsh Government should set clear ambitions for patient access to modern radiotherapy treatments, including the proportion of cancer patients who should receive radiotherapy and that 50% of radiotherapy patients receiving curative treatment get IMRT.

3. Workforce strategy
Radiotherapy is a complex treatment that requires multi-disciplinary working between Clinical Oncologists, Radiographers and Medical Physicists. To ensure patients can access the right treatments, and to take advantage of innovations and advances in radiotherapy techniques, a highly skilled and effective workforce is required. With extended clinical hours the radiotherapy workforce in Wales will continue to face sustained pressure, with an increased need for clinical and medical oncologists, radiographers, clinical scientists, dosimetrists and engineers. A CR-UK commissioned report published in 2014 recommended that the Welsh Government develop and implement a strategy to address radiotherapy workforce needs, with investment in education, best practices and the development of clear national educational targets. To our knowledge this has not been taken forward.

Recommendation 3: The Welsh Government should develop and implement a clear workforce strategy for the radiotherapy service. There should be specific focus and resource given to meet the recruitment challenges faced by services in the West of the country.

4. Distribution of new equipment
Innovative treatment devices are key to the future of radiotherapy, especially the ability to provide personalised treatment based on individual physical and biological characteristics. It is our understanding that there has been substantial capital investment in Wales over the last few years to provide state of the art linear accelerators (with 14 linear accelerators in use in 2014). However, distribution of new equipment across geographical areas seems to have been unequal, with the impact of limiting access to the latest techniques and clinical trials.

Recommendation 4: Through better national co-ordination the Welsh Government should ensure equal distribution of new equipment across geographical areas.

5. A national dataset
As mentioned above data on patient access to radiotherapy, including modern techniques, is not currently available in Wales. High quality national data guide decisions about configuration of services to ensure optimal patient access. Data can also facilitate high quality research and permit the more efficient conduct of trials. Appropriate resources are essential to the collection of good quality radiotherapy data.

We are aware that radiotherapy centres in Wales have been submitting data to the Radiotherapy Dataset (RTDS) administered by NatCanSat at Clatterbridge Cancer Centre. Responsibility for the RTDS for England has now moved from NatCanSat to Public Health England (PHE), and the future of data collected from Welsh centres is unclear. It is crucial that the Welsh Government builds on this and works towards having a national dataset for Wales. It would be beneficial if this data was in line with that of England to allow for comparability.

Recommendation 5: The Welsh Government should build on work to collect data, and ensure Wales has a robust national dataset for radiotherapy that captures and reports on patient access to all types of radiotherapy treatments, and allows for comparability across the UK.
6. **Research and Innovation**

Research and innovation is a critical part of any radiotherapy service, driving improvements in patient care and outcomes. High quality research must be incentivised and recognised, and the NHS must work to foster a proactive culture of research and innovation. Centres should therefore be encouraged to engage in research and should enter patients in national trials.

Significantly, Wales is playing an important leadership role in establishing UK radiotherapy research and trials activity. Velindre has the highest concentration of radiotherapy expertise, but centres from all parts of the country need to work together to ensure improvements are made across the whole system. We have been made aware that smaller centres can feel isolated from research and development opportunities. There needs to be continued commitment to the adoption of innovative radiotherapy technics to underpin research and development opportunities.

**Recommendation 6**: _The Welsh Government should consider how to better embed research across the whole radiotherapy service, including how to improve access to clinical trials, and how to ensure dedicated staff time and linear accelerator time for research purposes._

7. **Awareness**

Most people have heard of radiotherapy. However, the public’s perception of it as a cancer treatment remains understated. A recent YouGov survey of over 2,000 UK adults conducted by CR-UK in partnership with the Radiotherapy Awareness Programme (RAP) indicated 83% of those questioned did not necessarily know about the newest and best types of radiotherapy available. As a result, there is still work to be done to foster more awareness about radiotherapy and its benefits. Working with RAP, CR-UK hope to change perceptions by showcasing radiotherapy’s pioneering nature, highlighting the vital role it plays in the treatment of cancer patients.

**Recommendation 7**: _We encourage the Welsh Government and radiotherapy community to support the work of the Radiotherapy Awareness Programme in showcasing the innovative nature of radiotherapy to cancer patients and the wider public._

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References


