

Settle NHS dispute or thousands with cancer could die early, say health chiefs

Oncologists and cancer leaders are becoming increasingly alarmed and frustrated at the devastating impact of NHS strikes on care and treatment. Tens of thousands of patients have had cancer appointments, treatments and operations cancelled since the strikes began about 13 months ago.

The current six-day strike is the ninth time junior doctors have stopped working in the last year and the longest to hit the health service since it was founded in 1948.

But with no end in sight to the dispute between the government and junior doctors, who make up about half of the medical workforce, and medics refusing to rule out more strike action, oncologists and cancer leaders told the Guardian the stalemate was needlessly reducing the survival chances of sick patients.

Their intervention will pile further pressure on Rishi Sunak, the prime minister, Victoria Atkins, the health secretary, and the British Medical Association's junior doctors' committee to resume talks and agree to a deal.

Patients diagnosed with typically less survivable cancers such as lung, liver, brain, oesophageal, pancreatic and stomach, were particularly at risk from the disruption caused by the strikes, cancer leaders said. Any delay to treatments in these cases could severely limit their options and mean even worse survival prospects, they said.

Figures obtained through freedom of information requests showed that by September last year about 36,000 cancer appointments had been postponed due to strikes since industrial action started in December 2022.

A second tranche of data, also obtained under freedom of information laws, revealed thousands of cancer patients had crucial hospital appointments cancelled at least three times last year amid widespread NHS disruption.

Dr Ian Walker, Cancer Research UK's executive director of policy, said it was crucial the long-running row over pay was resolved urgently.

"We remain concerned that the continued industrial action will cause further disruption for cancer patients," he said. "It is vital that we see a

speedy resolution to current industrial action, but alongside this, government must deliver additional investment in NHS staff and diagnostic equipment, coupled with reform."

Walker said that even before industrial action piled extra strain on the NHS, there were worrying delays to vital cancer diagnoses and treatments. "Despite the best efforts of NHS staff we are now at real risk of the government missing its own recovery targets for cancer.

[...]Prof Pat Price, the chair of Radiotherapy UK and co-founder of the #CatchUpWithCancer campaign, said the continuing strike action was having a detrimental and undesirable impact on cancer patients. "I urge everyone to gather round a table to resolve these [strikes]," she said.

She added that the disruption came at a time when survival rates for cancer patients in the UK were already poor compared with other countries. [...]

"The terrible reality is that we are consistently missing the key 62-day target for the start of cancer treatment by a considerable margin. Currently, four in 10 cancer patients are waiting longer than 62 days. When every four weeks of delay can increase the risk of death by 10%, this is dreadful.

"The recent abandonment of a dedicated cancer plan, despite clear international evidence that countries with such a dedicated plan perform better, was another terrible blow to hopes that we can turn this around."