

King's Speech 2024 | An opportunity for change

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is the membership body for physicians, with members and fellows in the UK and internationally from over 30 medical specialties from cardiology and gastroenterology to geriatric medicine.

This first King's Speech following the general election is a vital opportunity to set out the bold action needed across workforce, prevention, research and sustainability to improve the health of the nation and ensure patients can access excellent NHS care.

Summary

- With waiting lists in England at 7.6 million, workforce is central to ensuring the NHS can deliver care now and in future. We support government in its commitment to deliver the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (LTWP) and plans to expand medical school and foundation places – **but with 47% of UK consultant physicians reporting in the 2023 RCP census that enjoyment in their job had decreased in the last year, retention must be a priority for the government.**
- Reducing health inequalities and avoidable illness is key to reducing avoidable demand on the NHS, ensuring it is fit for the future and improving the nation's health and productivity. We welcome the government's manifesto committed to tackle the social determinants of health and halve the gap in healthy life expectancy. **The introduction of a Mission Delivery Board on the social determinants of health will be vital to deliver these pledges by tackling what makes us ill in the first place.**
- We urge government to reintroduce the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.
- We encourage government to bring forward the necessary statutory instrument to deliver rapid implementation of the ban on the advertising of high fat, salt and sugar foods before the watershed to protect children's health.
- The climate crisis is the biggest global threat to health. **Ensuring a robust and credible pathway for reaching the UK's emission reduction targets must be a priority for the new government.**

Supporting the NHS workforce

[The RCP welcomed](#) the LTWP as an important first step towards a sustainably resourced NHS. Findings from our [2023 census](#) show 59% of consultant physicians reporting at least one vacant consultant post in their department, while 62% reported daily or weekly trainee rota gaps over the past year. We support the government's commitment to deliver LTWP proposals to expand medical school and foundation places. There is still a lot of detail to be worked through to make the doubling of medical school places a success, and we are ready to give our expertise and insight. Publishing projections of the numbers of postgraduate medical specialty training places needed to meet patient demand must be a priority for the 2025 revision of the LTWP, as well limiting the pace and scale of the physician associate (PA) rollout with a review of the projections for PA growth.

But recruiting more staff will be for nothing if existing staff leave. Too many doctors feel ignored, disillusioned and frustrated, working long hours, covering rota gaps and picking up extra clinics. 61% of consultants said that morale in their department had decreased or greatly decreased over the past year. Retention must be a priority for government and we would welcome clarity on plans to improve working conditions. Staff feeling supported and valued will be crucial if the government is to cut waiting lists and deliver more appointments. The RCP has [set out a range of short- and medium-term solutions](#) to make a difference now, including time off for significant life events, getting rotas in good time, rest areas, affordable childcare, ensuring the availability of food and drink and more flexible working and training. According to the RCP 2023 census, improved IT systems, reduced clinical workload and an increased workforce are the top 3 things that would make the biggest difference to job satisfaction.

Reducing health inequalities: a prevention based approach

Reducing health inequalities, and avoidable illness, is key to reducing NHS demand and ensuring the health service is fit for the future. While it may seem that health inequality is solely for the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS, health and social care services can only try and cure illnesses created by people's environments and contexts.

We welcome the government's manifesto committed to tackle the social determinants of health and halve the gap in healthy life expectancy. The new government's commitment to a Mission Delivery Board focussed on the social determinants of health offers a significant opportunity to take action on the root causes of illness, such as housing,

education, employment (including how much money you have), racism and discrimination, transport and air quality. The RCP and the over 260 members of the [Inequalities in Health Alliance \(IHA\)](#) have long called for a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities. We would encourage the government to use the Mission Delivery Board as a vehicle for developing and implementing such a strategy.

We are encouraged by the manifesto commitment to enact the socio-economic duty (SED) by commencing Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010, which the IHA has called for since its launch in 2020. The duty, which was never implemented, was designed to alleviate inequality by placing a legal responsibility on public bodies to pay due regard to how they can reduce inequalities of outcome, caused by socio-economic disadvantage, when making strategic decisions. Done effectively, the SED will be an important tool to ensure that those already socioeconomically disadvantaged aren't disadvantaged further.

Reintroduction of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill

Smoking is responsible for [64,000 deaths](#) in England a year. The RCP was one of many health organisations to [welcome](#) the Tobacco and Vapes Bill to protect the nation's health against the harms of tobacco and tackle youth vaping, while ensuring adult smokers still have access to e-cigarettes as a quitting aid. We are encouraged by the government's manifesto commitment to bring forward legislation to ensure the next generation can never legally buy cigarettes and urge Ministers to reintroduce the Tobacco and Vapes Bill in the King's speech.

Tackling obesity

Obesity is one of the UK's most pressing public health challenges. It is estimated that the NHS spends £6.5billion annually on treating obesity-related ill health and that the cost of obesity to the UK economy could be £98billion. We welcome the commitment to protect children from junk food advertising on TV and online, and urge rapid publication of the necessary statutory instrument to deliver this policy. Restricting junk food advertising and introducing free breakfast clubs for primary school children are crucial first steps to turn the tide on childhood obesity.

Clinical research

The Labour health mission rightly recognised that time for research can enhance staff recruitment and retention by improving job satisfaction. Clinical research and improved medical technology are also key to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of treatment – it must be embedded into the daily practice of doctors and capacity for research needs to be improved across the NHS. The government must ensure put clinical research at the heart of the healthcare system to drive innovation.

A sustainable approach to healthcare

The climate crisis is the biggest global threat to health. 2022 was the hottest year on record in the UK, causing nearly 3,000 excess deaths during five heat periods. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) projects the potential for heat-related deaths to increase 580% to 10,889 each year between now and the 2050s.

National governments have the power to make the biggest impact on climate change, setting the direction and ambition of policy. Ensuring a robust and credible pathway for reaching the UK's emission reduction targets must be a priority, alongside a just transition from fossil fuels and appropriately resourcing the NHS to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, including capital funding where necessary. We hope to see swift publication of a revised government plan to deliver net zero targets [following the 2024 High Court ruling](#) that the previous strategy was unlawful.

Questions for the Minister

- Does the Minister agree that a priority for the Mission Delivery Board on social determinants affecting health should be the development and implementation of a cross government strategy to reduce health inequalities?
- Does the Minister agree that retention is equally as important as recruitment in ensuring a well-staffed NHS?
- Will the Minister provide an update on the reintroduction of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill?
- Will the Minister confirm their department's intention to introduce restrictions on junk food advertising?
- Does the Minister recognise that climate change is a public health issue, and can he provide an update on plans to publish a government strategy to deliver net zero targets?

For more information, contact Jacob Hayes, senior public affairs and policy manager