

# CHANGE AND CHALLENGE ARE UPON US: PATHOLOGY, COVID-19 AND THE FUTURE



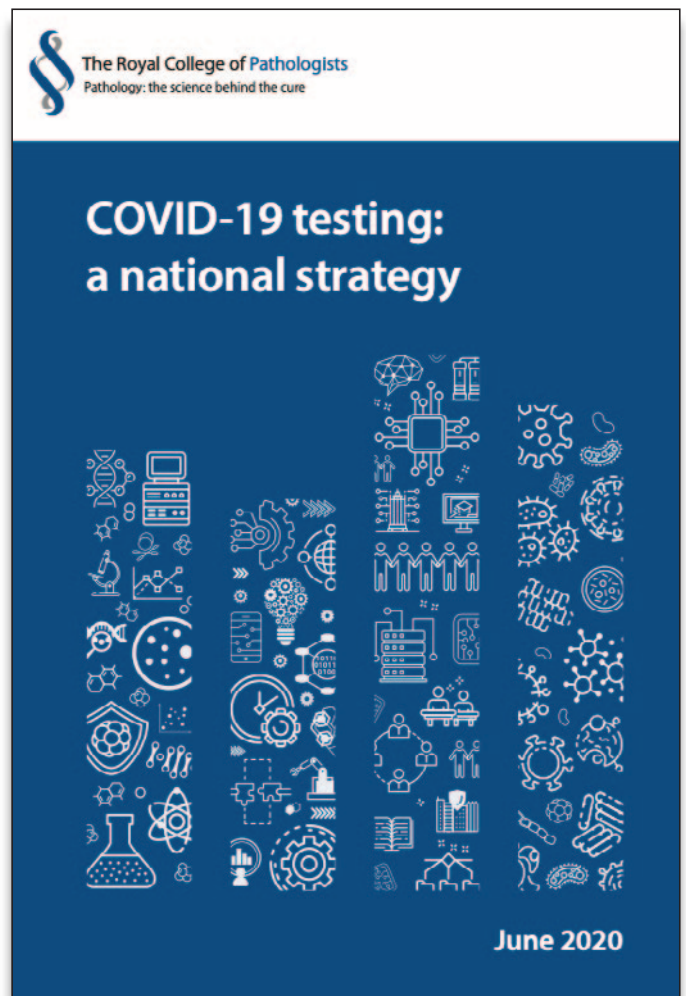
Professor Jo Martin is Professor of Pathology at Queen Mary University of London and honorary consultant at Barts Health NHS Trust. She is currently President of the Royal College of Pathologists.

**It has been a time of enormous change for everyone, all over the world. We have changed what we do and how we do it, including the services in which we work, in an incredibly short period of time and at a rapid pace with considerable personal effort. We have done this at a time when there has been huge change in our own circumstances in the face of personal loss or significant difficulties. We are grateful to everyone working in health and social care for their continued efforts for patients and for the profession. Pathology has been vital in this huge transformation and the incredible skill, determination and dedication of our medical and scientist pathologists has been unwavering and inspiring.**

Pathology covers 17 different specialty areas, and our work covers from before birth (reproductive sciences), throughout life (haematology, clinical biochemistry), and after death (cellular pathology and forensic pathology). For some of our disciplines, especially virology, microbiology and immunology, developing, deploying and advising about testing and control, we have been at the very heart of the battle against COVID-19.

## COVID-19 TESTING STRATEGY

In recent months, the College has carried out a huge amount of work on the development of a national strategy for COVID-19 testing. With the support of 22 organisations, we have brought the focus back to the purpose of testing, the skills for interpretation and quality control, and the key infrastructure and data connectivity that is needed, rather than just numbers of tests being performed.



## Our health priorities for the government

### Workforce investment

Increased investment in pathology services, particularly in the recruitment and training of pathologists and scientists.



### IT and infrastructure

Further capital investment is needed to fully roll out digital pathology, so staff can work more efficiently and flexibly.



### Pensions

While the one year NHS England action is welcome, a long-term UK-wide government solution is required.



### Genomic testing

The creation of a regulatory body, similar to HFEA to oversee genomic testing in the UK would protect the public and the NHS.



The strategy looks past the peak of the epidemic for both viral and antibody testing and has been developed to help build robust process and structures that will work for the future. It sets out a vision for a future strategy with which clinical, scientific and policy stakeholders, including patient advocacy groups, can align. It forms the basis for a roadmap to delivery. It applies equally to all settings in which care is delivered, across all our population, and all age groups.

The implementation of this strategy needs to be planned and executed with the same energy and sense of urgency with which the initial response was handled. Testing is not something that is just done and counted. It is a process with clinical purposes for individual patients, for those who care for them and for the population at large. It is a conscious and targeted use of valuable materials and highly skilled professionals within the context of a pathway and purpose.

Our pathology professionals, working with partners in industry, the health service and public health bodies, have done exceptional work and deserve immense credit for the vast amount they have already

achieved. Pathology training and professionalism has stood healthcare in good stead in recent times, and will do so for the future – through the pandemic and well beyond. The profession needs the appropriate resources to continue its vital work.

### CROWDSOURCING NEW IDEAS

As part of forward-facing efforts, the College has been heavily involved in the development and championing of an innovative crowdsourcing platform Testing Methods 2020, working in partnership with the Department of Health & Social Care, the UK Bioindustry Association and BIVDA. This project has posed COVID-19 specific challenges for our community of pathologists, laboratory professionals and industry. Examples have included extraction-free rtPCR methods, alternatives to swab methods and multiplexing. A new challenge has also just been launched on 'greener testing' that is being championed by Dr Esther Youd, our Assistant Registrar, who is also our RCPATH Trustee Board sustainability champion. This has suggestions on plastic-free swabs, and we are looking forward to ways in which we might be able to reduce our plastic use for the transport of samples.

### WORKFORCE AND TRAINING

As we move into the next phase of dealing with the COVID-19 epidemic, and as we try to build back up to some form of normality in our health services, I am acutely aware that many of the problems around lack of workforce, especially in transfusion and histopathology, are still there. With the requirement to isolate for 14 days if 'tracked and traced', I have highlighted the specific risks around transfusion staffing and have asked all chief executives of acute trusts to urgently risk assess their own service. During my pre-pandemic lab tours, I saw several labs with only three people providing a 24-hour service. This is not sustainable.

Increased investment into pathology services to train and recruit more scientist and medical pathologists must be a priority during this parliamentary term.

I am acutely aware that many within pathology (and of course the entire health and social care service) have been operating flat out for many months. We are proud of what has been achieved, but very conscious of the challenges ahead. This epidemic will continue for the foreseeable future, and it has already seen some regional resurgences. Support must be provided to the workforce to ensure they are having adequate rest time, taking breaks and annual leave where possible.

### YOU ARE WELCOME!

You will always be welcome for a visit in your local labs...meet those amazing professionals who are doing so much in the struggle against COVID-19. While you are there, also take the opportunity to see all the other pathology expertise in action, and talk with those who make transplants possible, those who see that you have blood when you need it, those who diagnose and guide treatments for cancer, and those in both human and veterinary pathology who do so much to control antimicrobial resistance. We are amazing! □

