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## Cancer patients deserve the best treatment despite pressures of coronavirus

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The response to the coronavirus is already having a severe impact on patients with a range of other health issues as operations are deferred and treatments reprioritised. And in particular for cancer patients, this impact will be an issue long after the imminent expected "peak virus" has passed.

Until a vaccine is generally available special measures will continue to be needed for cancer patients as their condition often reduces immunity and so increases the risk of coronavirus complications. The inescapable consequence of the recent NHS guidelines on cancer prioritisation is that some cancer patients who would have survived without the pandemic will be lost.

Despite the heroic efforts of all concerned, these disruptions to treatment pathways mean that this is perhaps the most worrying period in our lifetimes to be given a cancer diagnosis. It's vital that the NHS reconfiguration of all cancer treatments, but particularly radiotherapy, is supported, well funded, and flexible and innovative enough to save as many lives as possible.

Radiotherapy is already one of the major weapons against cancer. One in four of us will need it at some point in our lives and it is already needed in four out of ten cancer cures. The number of people receiving radiotherapy is as high as the number receiving chemotherapy. It is delivered by a community of around 5,000 dedicated, highly trained professionals. They are already performing heroically in the face of the Covid-19 challenge.

But its role is about to become even more crucial as clinicians judge it to be most appropriate treatment option in even more cancer cases for two main reasons. First, surgery as a treatment option will become more difficult as surgical resource (and the associated intensive care resource) is redeployed to combat Covid-19. Second, clinicians are aware that chemotherapy tends to reduce immunity so will judge radiotherapy to be, on balance, the better and safer option for more patients.



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the full capability and capacity of the radiotherapy service, to play its part in making sure that as many cancer patients are saved as possible, has never been greater. And some of those steps are eminently achievable at pace. First, the radiotherapy professionals need to be a priority case for the supply of PPE. It is outrageous that some centres appear to have no PPE at all, and many others limited supplies of only partially effective items.

Secondly, the bureaucratic restriction that only half of the centres in England can offer the more advanced and faster radiotherapy techniques, even though their machines are capable of delivering it, needs to be swept aside. Thirdly, there is an urgent need to boost IT connectivity between and within radiotherapy centres to maximise treatment capacity, and fourthly, the government should harness the significant spare radiotherapy capacity that exists in the private sector.

These are eminently achievable steps that can, and should, be taken. Cancer patients, and not just those of today, but of the next many months deserve the very best we can do despite the unavoidable pressures of this pandemic.

**Professor Pat Price is a visiting professor in surgery at Imperial College, London, and chairwoman of the charity Action Radiotherapy**

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