

## Long NHS waiting times are killing UK productivity: Getting the basics right



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The government's recently announced 10-year plan for the NHS promises a host of improvements, particularly around out-of-hospital care, integrated care and population health management. But it says surprisingly little about reducing waiting times to improve the economy's productivity.

Since the global economic crisis of 2008/09, UK productivity has grown by as little as 0.4 per cent a year. While there are many reasons for this, one of the least discussed is the impact of long NHS waiting times. Yet it is clear that healthcare backlogs increase the risk of people's conditions worsening, they cause workplace absence, and can result in some people having to give up work altogether.

For example, over 30 million working days are lost due to musculoskeletal conditions each year in the UK. Diagnosing and treating people quickly is essential to getting people back to work, but the NHS is struggling like never before with long waiting times to the detriment of patients, their employers and the wider economy.

Part of the answer lies in better diagnostic tests. Too many healthcare organisations are using outdated imaging equipment which makes it harder to provide swift and effective diagnoses. In some hospitals, radiographers use scanners that produce such low-quality images that they have to rescan the patients. Yet, despite these recognised problems, half of healthcare organisations say they have no plans to upgrade their systems because they do not have the funds.

The low numbers of scanners in the NHS is another problem that is getting in the way of early diagnosis. The UK has 9.5 CT scanners per 1,000,000 people, which is less than half of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 26. The UK has 7.2 MRI machines per 1,000,000 people, compared to the OECD average of 16. At the same time, we are seeing increased demand with the number of patients referred for diagnostic tests increasing by 25% over the last five years.

Of course, prevention and early diagnosis through better scanning is just one example of how we can reduce waiting times but it's an important one. As the NHS starts to plan how it will use the

extra £20 billion a year promised by government it should be making diagnostic equipment a clear priority. That will be good for our health and for our productivity.

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