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UK - Consultant Surgeons Go Beyond Contracts to Provide 24 Hour Patient Care

A comprehensive survey of the surgical workforce by the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) reveals almost three quarters of consultant surgeons work more than their contracted hours and seventy percent report they are expected to undertake elective operations while they are supposed to be on call for emergencies.

The Surgical Workforce Report 2010 is the first edition of what will become an annual survey of surgical consultants' working practices and is intended to provide the NHS with accurate figures to inform long term planning of the numbers of surgeons required to serve the UK.

Results show that almost three quarters of respondents work above the standard NHS ten sessions a week recommended by NHS Employers (called "programmed activities" or PAs in the NHS). This entails working significantly longer than the 48 hour European working time limit – however just twenty percent of consultants have formally opted-out of the Working Time Regulation.

Nearly nine in ten consultant surgeons who responded to the survey work on call at weekends and evenings providing 24 hour care. Most of these surgeons work in on-call rotas between one in four, and one in eight. RCS guidelines state that time spent on call is intended to have a surgeon readily available to deal with emergencies – but seventy percent of respondents report they are expected to undertake elective operating lists during on-call time. This is a significant barrier to improving emergency surgery in some specialties in the UK.

John Black, President of the RCS, said: "This survey demonstrates the high level of commitment to patients that exists in surgery...It is a matter of concern that so many surgeons are being expected to undertake elective operations while on call – other studies have shown this leads to delays in them getting to emergencies as they cannot be in two places at once."

The survey will be available from RCS website at: www.rcseng.ac.uk/publications/docs/surgical-workforce-2010-profile-and-trends

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