British Medical Ultrasound Society

Guidance for Optimising Practitioner and Patient Safety in Ultrasound Departments

The pandemic has been a difficult time for all of us, both patients and staff. We have had to contend with increased sickness absence at work, worry for our own health, worry for our family's health and worry about keeping others around us safe. For some staff, stress levels have soared due to the effect of socially distancing in their personal lives, yet at work being in close contact with many different people every day. In addition to this, staff have been coping with rapidly changing working patterns and often inconsistent guidance surrounding PPE.

For many patients attending appointments, undergoing treatment and tests alone have also caused tremendous anxiety. Sometimes patients have received distressing news with no family members or friends to accompany them for support.

The pandemic has demonstrated that as healthcare professionals, now more than ever, we need to ensure a safe environment for the patients we see. This guidance has been produced to provide advice for both patients and ultrasound practitioners accessing, and working within, ultrasound services as Government guidance around Covid-19 rules starts to relax.

This guidance has been divided into two sections. The first is advice for patients that departments may wish to adopt and adapt for their own use. The latter section is provided for ultrasound practitioners and service managers who may be considering new ways of working.

How can I as a patient help protect other patients and vulnerable staff?

The pandemic has highlighted that in our communities we have vulnerable people around us daily. Many are living with long-term conditions that affect their immune systems and make them at higher risk of contracting infections. There is a higher risk of preterm delivery in pregnant women with COVID-19 and an increasing number of older people in our communities and people who are undergoing treatment for active cancers. Even after the pandemic, we must continue to help keep each other and specifically, these people in our communities, safe.

We would appreciate your assistance in helping to keep our patients and staff safe by adhering to the following:

Many ultrasound departments have very small waiting areas so please try to avoid arriving very early or late for your appointment. Instead, aim to arrive on time ensuring that the use of waiting areas will be kept to a minimum. Bringing relatives and friends with you also increases waiting room use. You can help by attending appointments alone where you feel comfortable and asking relatives to wait outside, or by bringing just one friend or relative with you.

Please wear a mask while on hospital premises. This includes while waiting for your appointment, during your appointment and after your appointment until you are away from hospital entrances. Masks do not provide as much protection as social distancing but evidence shows they reduce significantly the number of respiratory droplets transmitted from your nose and mouth, therefore reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission. If you are exempt from wearing a mask, please wear your sunflower lanyard so that staff and other patients know not to challenge you as you have a

valid reason for not adhering to government guidance. Please don't be offended if you are challenged when you are not wearing one of these lanyards – staff are trying their best to keep you and others around them safe. If you cannot wear a mask or do not have one, please wear a face covering of some form if you can. Most hospitals will be happy to offer you a face mask on arrival.

Please adhere to information posters and leaflets in the department you are attending and be respectful and courteous to staff at all times.

How can I as a staff member help keep the ultrasound department safe?

Staff should ensure that the examination they are undertaking is justified and based on clinical need. Scans other than screening scans, should be performed only where there is a clear clinical question. This applies to both obstetric and general scans. Managing capacity will ensure that there are spaces in lists to accommodate extra, clinically urgent scans on the day of attendance for patients, preventing re-admission and therefore cross-infection of patients re-entering the hospital.

It is always best practice to keep scanning time to a minimum but especially relevant now, to ensure contact time with patients is minimised and to avoid appointments over-running, which may in turn lead to overcrowded waiting areas.

Staff can also keep their department safer by adhering to their local protocols regarding hand hygiene, use and frequency of disposable PPE and by being mindful of distancing when communicating with colleagues, patients and their relatives. Furthermore, they should feel empowered to challenge others failing to observe best practice. Social distancing, hand hygiene and use of PPE applies to both clinical and non-clinical settings including restrooms, canteens and corridors.

Risk assessments regarding ultrasound room ventilation, capacity and the ability for staff to socially distance should be performed by the appropriate staff member and the results of these assessments must be adhered to.

If staff experience bullying, abuse or aggression from colleagues, patients or persons accompanying patients, they are urged to log details on an electronic incident reporting system (Datix)

For how long will services be affected?

It is not possible to predict how long ultrasound services and departments will be affected by the legacy of Covid-19 but undoubtedly the impact will be felt for many months, if not years. Some services may never return to 'pre-Covid normal' since better ways of delivery may have been found during the pandemic. Other aspects of ultrasound may require longer to catch up. However, adhering to best practice for keeping staff and patients safe, as outlined above, will ensure services continue to function at their most effective now and in the months ahead.