

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on clinical guidance, risk assessment and support for UK obstetric sonographers

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Introduction

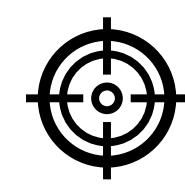
 Sonographers have an integral role in the provision of high-quality, inclusive and supportive parent-centred care during fetal ultrasound examinations.¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, initial guidance suggested modifications to fetal imaging services,² including the need for departmental assessments to identify and mitigate against potential harm to staff, expectant parents and the public.³ Concerns for obstetric sonographers, already acknowledged to be at high-risk for occupational burnout,⁴ were raised as additional stressors incurred by the pandemic were experienced by staff. These included working in small, often poorly ventilated scan rooms, wearing PPE, and additional cleaning requirements.⁵

Discussion

 Whilst most sonographers were aware of published COVID-19 guidance, challenges for implementation in clinical departments were identified. Local risk mitigation strategies often did not prioritise the scan room environment, despite it being highlighted as a concern. The longer-term implications of the pandemic on the sonographic workforce are currently largely unknown, however perceived lack of support from senior management and professional organisations may negatively affect sonographers' receptiveness to practice changes and may contribute to high levels of occupational burnout within the workforce.⁶

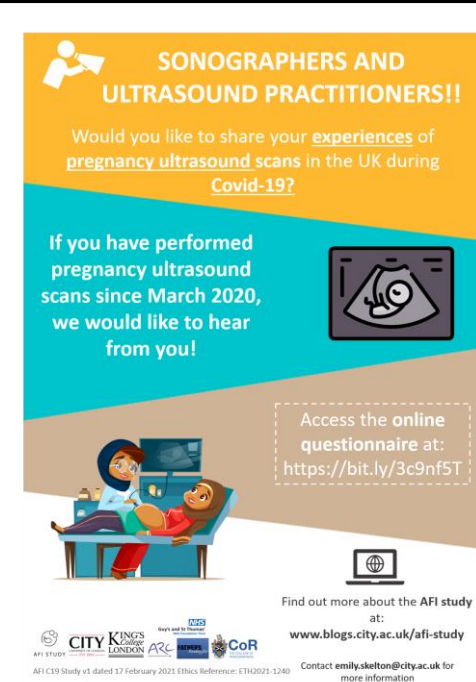
Aims

To provide an insight into the implementation of new guidance, completion of risk assessments and perception of support for sonographers within UK obstetric ultrasound departments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

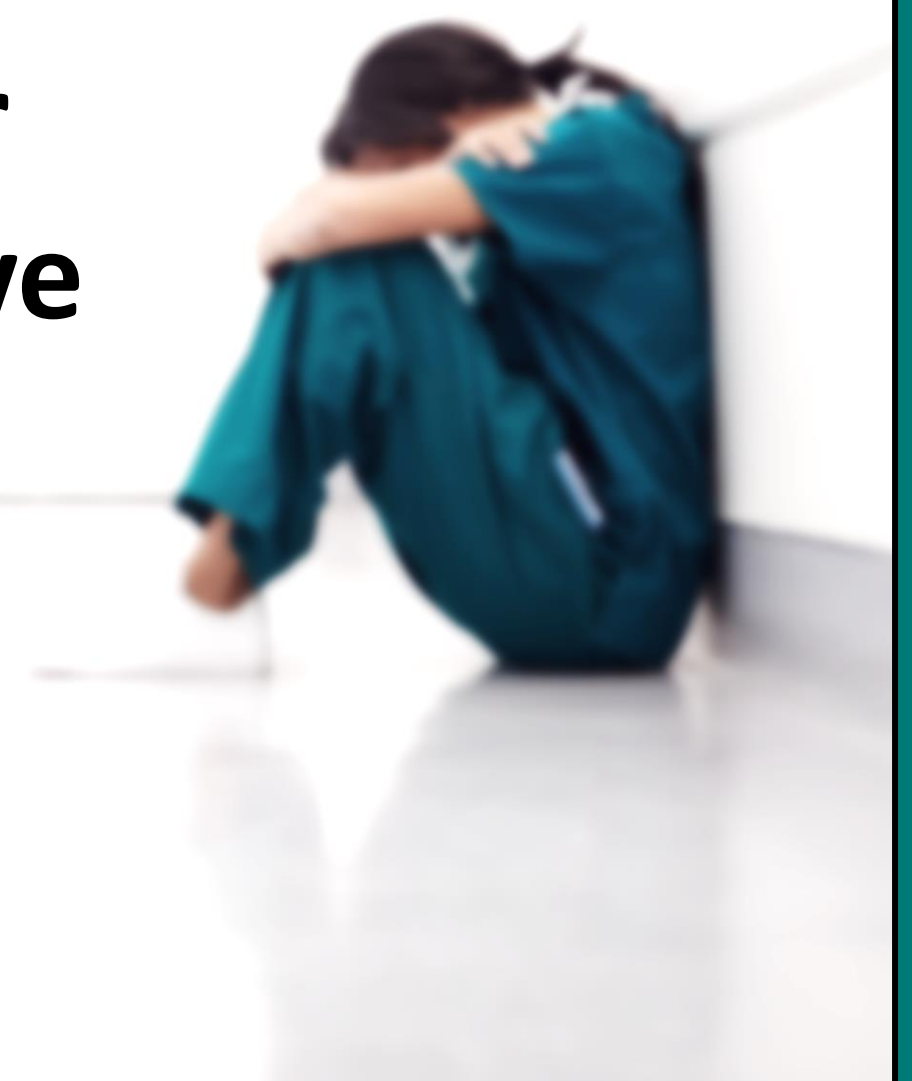


Methods

A UK-wide, online, anonymous survey was open to responses between 9th March – 6th May 2021. The survey contained multiple choice and Likert-style questions related to **guidance**, **risk assessment** and **support** for UK obstetric sonographers during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was also an option to provide additional details using free-text boxes. Ethical approval was granted by City, University of London (ETH2021-1240). Responses were received from 138 sonographers, with an average survey completeness of 81%.



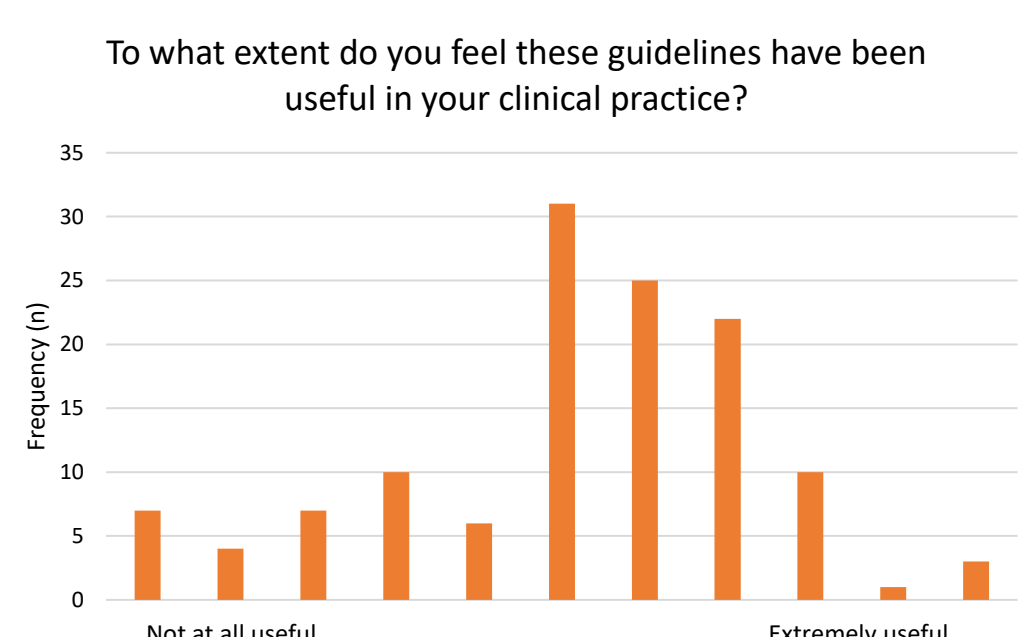
As the workforce enters a period of post-pandemic recovery, there is increased need for visible and effective leadership, and greater support for obstetric sonographers



Results: Guidance

"I don't think they have taken into consideration the environment whilst scanning."

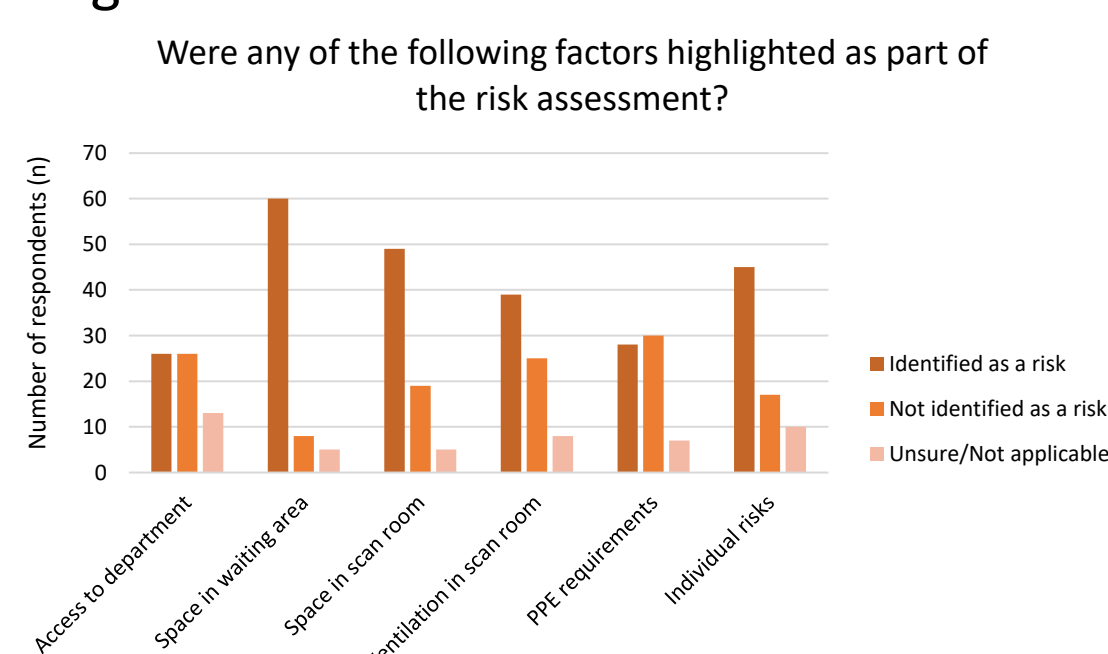
The mean score for the usefulness of all COVID-19 guidance was 5.2 (where 0=not useful at all, and 10=extremely useful), indicating that they were found to be neither helpful nor unhelpful.



Results: Risk assessment

"...very inadequate ventilation but was deemed acceptable risk..."

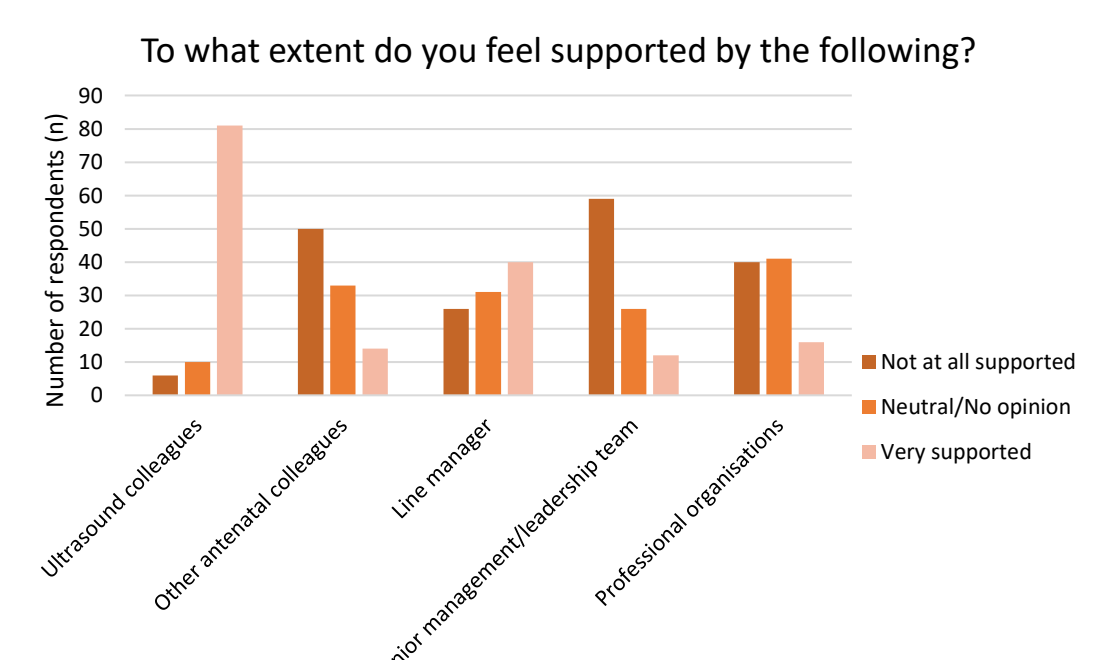
Following risk assessment, frequently identified risk factors were departmental waiting areas (82.2%), space in the scan room (67.1%), individual risks (62.5%) and ventilation (54.2%). However, action was not always taken to mitigate risks.



Results: Support

"...the final decisions always lie with the senior management team who don't understand the complexity of our role."

Sonographers felt most supported by their ultrasound colleagues (83.5%), but least supported by senior managers (60.8%), other antenatal colleagues (51.5%) and professional organisations (41.2%).



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