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Title: Charting the practical dimensions of understaffing from a managerial perspective: everyday consequences of the UK's sonographer shortage

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Abstract

Background: The Society and College of Radiographers reports that, by 2014, 18.1% of UK ultrasound vacancies remained unfilled, a substantial rise from the 10.9% reported in 2011, and the 10.1% reported in 2009.^[1,2] Indeed by 2013, the UK government's Migration Advisory Committee had listed sonography as an official 'shortage specialty'.^[3,4] The research reported herein is designed to lend qualitative depth to our current understanding of the "coal-face" situation in the UK's ultrasound units from the perspective of their managers.

Methods: Using a Straussian model of Grounded Theory,^[5,6] extended accounts provided by N=20 ultrasound department leads in public (n=17) and private (n=3) units were analysed.

Results: Three global themes emerged from the analysis. The first addresses how a lack of staff in the broader economy has created a migratory system that works chiefly to the advantage of the most junior and the most senior clinicians, often leaving mid-career professionals in a borderline impossible situation. The second highlights how the knowledge economy in many departments is being stymied by early retirement and late-career migration, rendering questions about how advanced expertise in ultrasound might be obtained and sustained by the remaining experienced clinicians. The third underscores how it is often workplace instability, rather than simple short staffing, that is most damaging to staff morale, planning capacity and clinical self-efficacy.

Conclusions: This work ideally opens up debates on some largely undiscussed practical contingencies of the sonographer shortage, and can help ground future deductive research in the real-world experience of key actors.

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