

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASK

“How could Brexit impact laboratory supply chains and continuity?”



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For the NHS in the UK there remain several unknowns that could potentially impact the service. However, for Northern Ireland there is the added issue of the border between North and South. This is proving a thorny issue and to date nothing has been agreed in relation to the movement of goods and people across this UK/EU frontier.

For laboratories, the main concerns of a “no deal” outcome are twofold; the future timely supply and delivery of goods and services, including replacement parts for equipment; and the potential increase in costs if tariffs are introduced. If these goods need to cross a “hard border” from Ireland into Northern Ireland then there could be further delays in delivery.

Guidance from government bodies to NHS organisations remains confusing; in some cases suggesting there should be no stockpiling of goods and in others saying stockpiling of some goods is appropriate.

It may also present challenges for staff living in Ireland, but working in laboratories in the North and vice versa, if a hard border returns. There is the additional concern that the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications may no longer be maintained, which again may impact the workforce.

The best we can do to prepare is to “plan for the worst and hope for the best”.

We are told “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”, so watch this space as all we know for certain is, there is likely to be further change.

IMAGE: ISTOCK



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The true answer, at this point, is of course that no one knows. It is dependent on many factors the most important of which is “deal or no deal”. Many of the laboratory supply chains are controlled by international conglomerates with headquarters outside the UK. Lean management principles dictate that laboratories implement “just in time” ordering holding minimum inventory. In a “no deal” scenario, the World Trade Organization rules apply, with administrative costs for supplier and customer and expected changes in VAT. The supply chain and tariffs will also be much more complicated if component parts are sourced between EU and non EU countries.

It is unclear if the NHS will address this issue as a whole and move to protect all supply chains, or if this will be left to individual trusts. Large corporations servicing laboratories may already have distribution and logistics infrastructure within the UK. However, some of them service the UK and Irish market from depots in Europe near to the channel.

The situation is not much better for Ireland, which remains in the EU, as many suppliers manage the UK and Ireland market as one operation.

This short piece has just considered the supply chain of reagents, equipment and parts, it has not considered the other crucial supply chains of staff or access to research funding, which will be disrupted.

Like the scouts say “be prepared”. The only thing clear at the moment is that nothing is clear.



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Pathology labs are no strangers to contingency plans and in the event of a no-deal Brexit, this is no different. Supply chains are likely to be disrupted, with an anticipated slowdown of the flow of goods. Matt Hancock, Health and Social Care Secretary, has written to suppliers asking for increased commercial buffer stocks, increased national stock holding and plans to use air freight, if ports are blocked.

A resilient supply chain, good communications and close working relationships with suppliers are vital