

Speech: Junior Doctors' Contracts Debate

Mr Deputy Speaker

Thank you for allowing me to contribute to this debate.

In September, I was contacted by a number of Junior Doctors who serve, or live in, the constituency of Bexhill & Battle.

These Junior Doctors were concerned about the changes to their contracts and I invited them to meet me to discuss their concerns. Word spread and we had an excellent turnout and a full and frank exchange which lasted the evening.

I hope that I can do justice to some of these conversations during the limited time allotted.

The first item discussed was around the communication of the contract changes.

Having myself had the benefit of a really positive meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss the rationale, I was surprised that NHS Employees had not contacted every single Junior Doctor to explain the NHS' reasoning for the changes.

It appears that the Junior Doctors were left to gain their information via the BMA. It was agreed that this was unlikely to lead to a balanced approach. It would be welcome if NHS Employers are able to create an email for all impacted staff rather than hope individual trusts will forward matters on.

The next element was the language and tone from some of the pronouncements from the Doctors and Dentists Remuneration Board.

The Junior Doctors found this to be hostile and showed me language to exemplify their view.

The DDRB's suggestion of not wanting to 'create an incentive to work slower' was, I agreed, unlikely to be troubling the sections of the library referencing staff motivation.

It struck me that political expertise in managing these messages is always welcome earlier in the process.

On the subject of hours, there again seemed to be a lack of agreement as to the maximum working week.

The Junior Doctors were concerned that they may be required to work 90 hours but it appears to now be settled that:

- The absolute maximum working hours per week will be reduced from 91 to 72 hours;
- The practice of working a 'week of nights' will be ended; and
- A limit will be brought on the number of long days which can be worked consecutively.

According to the Department of Health, no Junior Doctors will be expected to work on average more than 48 hours a week.

I welcome these changes which will improve working conditions and also patient safety – the key priority for the Junior Doctors I met with.

I am sympathetic to any hard-working professional who is saving up for a property and the other things we all aspire for in life.

It concerned me to hear that the Junior Doctors thought that their pay would reduce and were open to seeking a new challenge in Canada and Australia.

Whilst I was able to reassure that the changes to the contracts are to standardise and simplify and that the measures are cost-neutral, it is regrettable that this has not got back via the BMA.

Having received an absolute guarantee that average pay for junior doctors will not reduce, I am pleased to relay the same to my Junior Doctors today and hope that they will see their future in our NHS.

Contract renegotiations are best conducted between the parties rather than with MPs getting involved and making politics out of a situation which has real concern for the Junior Doctors I met and represent.

These are hard-working people who are dedicated to their profession and to their patients.

I very much regret that this situation has occurred but I ultimately look to the future and I hope that NHS Employers and BMA can produce a contract which gives comfort over maximum hours, pay and conditions.

On the basis that my Government will ensure delivery, I will be supporting the Government's amended motion.

OPPOSITION MOTION

That this House notes the stalled discussions between Government and the British Medical Association (BMA) about a new junior doctors' contract; opposes the removal of financial penalties from hospitals which protect staff from working excessive hours; urges the Government to guarantee that no junior doctor will have their pay cut as a result of a new contract; and calls upon the Government to withdraw the threat of contract imposition, put forward proposals which are safe for patients and fair for junior doctors and return to negotiations with the BMA.

GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT

Line 1, leave out from 'House' to end and add 'welcomes the Government's commitment to delivering seven-day hospital services and saving lives by combating the weekend effect; notes the British Medical Association's (BMA) decision to walk away from negotiations to reform a contract which all sides acknowledge is not fit for purpose; further notes the Government's proposed introduction of new contractual limits which protect staff from working unsafe hours and the commitment that average junior doctors' pay will not fall; and calls on the BMA to put patient care first, to choose talks over strikes, and to return to negotiations.'