

GP dossier says patients getting “second rate” service

Zosia Kmiotowicz *London*

Intolerable working conditions in general practice mean that many patients are receiving a “second rate—or worse” health service, and unless extra resources are pumped into the system patient care will continue to be compromised, warned the BMA this week.

The experiences of more than 100 doctors from across the United Kingdom have been assembled in a snapshot survey to highlight the strains under which family doctors are working.

Among the stories is one from a Cardiff GP whose patients have to wait six years for a hip replacement operation and one from a GP in Bolton who complained that a patient with suspected ovarian cancer had to wait 23 weeks before being seen by a consultant. Many of the doctors quoted in the survey are frustrated that valuable clinical time is being taken up by chasing up hospital appointments for patients or petitioning hospitals to see their patients sooner.

“GPs’ morale is at an all time low, with many family doctors feeling that patients are being let down. Inadequate consultation times; burgeoning paperwork; a shortage of doctors, nurses, and hospital beds; plus under-resourced new directives and targets, all lead to patients not getting the care they deserve,” said Dr John Chisholm, chairman of the BMA’s General Practitioners Committee.

Conditions are so bad that many GPs are considering early retirement or trying to find alternative employment. Dr Martin Steely, a singlehanded GP in Manchester who gave up being a Royal Air Force pilot to train as a doctor, said: “If I had known it was going to be like this, I would not have done it. If I had remained a pilot I would have retired by now with a big

pension; instead I find myself battling to do my job.”

The systems failure that has caused the crisis in general practice is due to two factors, said Dr Chisholm. New money promised for the NHS is being used to write off old debts and keep services running rather than to make any improvements to existing services, and the health service is chronically short of both doctors and nurses.

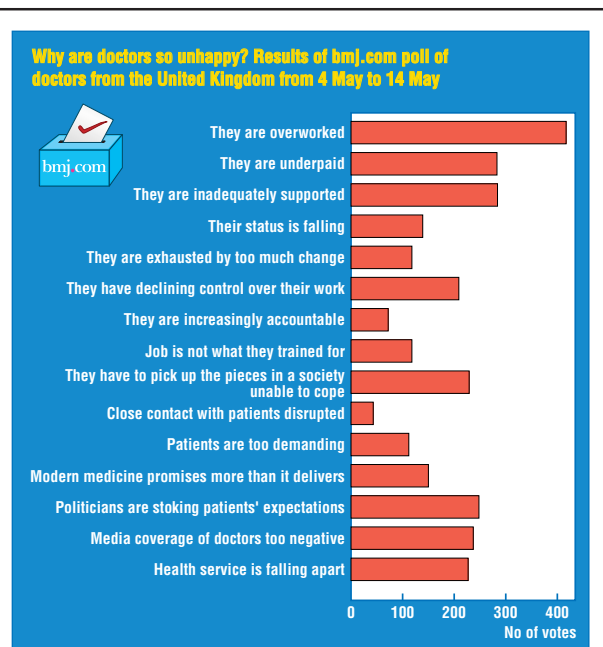
“GPs have stressed that they do not blame their hospital colleagues for the difficulties their patients experience in getting secondary care treatments—the hospitals too are stretched to the limit. Inevitably, however, when people have operations cancelled, or face long waits to see a specialist, it is the family doctor who has to keep the patient going until treatment has been delivered,” said Dr Chisholm.

The delay for hip replacements in Cardiff was “an appalling illustration of how patients are being let down... to have to wait six years for necessary treatment is a system failure.”

Other doctors quoted in the dossier complained of:

- Having to dial 999 to get their patients admitted to hospital as emergencies because they could not get them admitted any other way
- Patients with depression in Barnet, north London, having to wait 17 months to see a therapist
- Patients with heart disease in Liskeard, Cornwall, having to wait two and a half years for cardiology treatment
- Long waits for neurosurgery in Salford, where a patient with a slipped disc has been waiting in constant pain for an operation since November 1999
- Waiting time of two years to see a psychologist in Cumbria. □

Crisis in care: A GP dossier is accessible on the BMA’s website at www.bma.org.uk



Doctors explain their unhappiness

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

More than 1400 people voted in the *BMJ* poll on why doctors are unhappy. The poll was set up after an editorial in the *BMJ*, in which the editor, Dr Richard Smith, put forward his views on why the profession was miserable (5 May, p 1073).

Readers were asked to give the three to four reasons that they thought were most relevant, out of a total of 15. The most popular reasons given by UK doctors were that they were overworked, underpaid, and inadequately supported, and politicians were stoking patients’ expectations.

The full results of the poll, which closed earlier this week, can be seen on bmj.com.

Votes came from more than 90 countries, including Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, India, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. On the basis of the final results, the *BMJ* will draw up a league table of the world’s unhappiest doctors.

Certain causes of misery were more common among doctors from the United Kingdom than among those from abroad. Those from abroad did not so often blame politicians for stoking patients’ expectations; nor did they find that the media coverage of doctors was too negative. They were also less inclined to say that they were exhausted from too much change or that their health service was falling apart.

On the other hand, they complained more than British doctors that they had declining control over their work. Among both groups, the most common complaint was overwork.