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Junior Doctors Committee

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Dear Mr Amy

Accommodation for pre-registration doctors

It was helpful to have the opportunity earlier this month to speak to you and your colleagues on the Review Body regarding our submission of evidence on behalf of junior doctors. We hope that our contribution to the oral evidence session was of interest.

We felt it might be useful to set out in more detail our concerns regarding the removal of free accommodation, and our line of reasoning for an uplift in basic pay for pre-registration doctors. This issue is absolutely crucial for some 5,500 medical students currently applying for a place on the Foundation Programme in 2008. You may be aware that there are a number of petitions (unconnected to the BMA) circulating amongst students and junior doctors, some with many thousands of signatures, that seek a retraction of the recent amendments to the Medical Act that removed the residence requirement and a reinstatement of accommodation without charge e.g. <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/FY1accommodation/>. It is clear that medical students and doctors feel very strongly about this change in their prospective benefits. In our opinion it would be disastrous if the Review Body were minded not to make some recognition of the lost benefit for 2008 and beyond, and we very much hope that the following further information illuminates the situation further.

Medical Act: history of discussions

The first question asked of us by the Review Body last week on this issue was about the BMA's involvement in the changes to the Medical Act. There was an implication that the JDC had agreed to the removal of the residence requirement and the consequent loss of the free accommodation. This is categorically not the case. The JDC has always opposed any moves to remove the entitlement to free accommodation. However, the committee was involved in discussions during 2004 concerning the future of the accommodation provision but the matter was left unresolved.

During 2004 the JDC met the Department of Health on a number of occasions at regular meetings of the Joint Negotiating Committee (Juniors) and discussed, amongst many other issues, the future of free accommodation for pre-registration doctors and the Medical Act's requirement for such doctors to be resident. Throughout these meetings it was clear that both parties were keen to ensure that free accommodation continued to be available to those doctors who required it. Discussion focused on safeguarding the right to free accommodation by enshrining its provision in the terms and conditions of service for pre-registration doctors. Both the Department of Health and the JDC felt it was vital to achieve this if the residence requirement was to be removed from the Act.

Progress was complicated by the four devolved health departments holding differing views on the provision of free accommodation and the matter was dropped from negotiating agendas in early 2005 without agreement on a way forward being reached. However, the BMA maintained its position that PRHOs should continue to be offered free accommodation and the JDC understood that the matter was closed and no changes would be made.

It was therefore incredibly disappointing to find out in 2006 that the amended Medical Act had dropped the residence requirement. The consultation process that the Department of Health led regarding the amending of the Act made no mention of the removal of the residence requirement for FHO1s and no prior discussions were held with the BMA regarding this issue. The JDC feels therefore that a contractual benefit, which the vast majority of FHO1s take advantage of, has effectively been removed without negotiation. Those doctors affected, both currently and in the future, should receive suitable financial recompense for this and any award should reflect the costs associated with living in local accommodation that is of an appropriate standard for pre-registration doctors.

Previous evidence submissions by the Departments of Health

We were pleased that in the Review Body's report of 2006 it was recognised that free accommodation was widely regarded as an additional benefit, which of course has been provided for very many years. In previous years the Departments of Health have argued similarly. For example:

"When the value of the free accommodation provided in the first year of training is taken into consideration, the position of medical graduates is rather better than graduates in other professions. Even after taking into account the longer university course and the consequent potential for higher levels of student debt, the savings on accommodation and travel to work (because most PRHOs are housed in or close to their base hospital), combined with the guarantee of a post and a salary at the top end of the graduate spectrum, still leaves medicine as a most attractive career choice." (paragraph 5.56, 2005 DH evidence, our emphasis).

We have been surprised this year to find that the Departments of Health now, conveniently, take the view that free accommodation is of less significance.

London Weighting

There has been some debate between the parties over whether or not the provision of free accommodation is recognised as a benefit in lieu of salary. The JDC has always understood this to be the case, and this position is supported by the terms and conditions of service for hospital doctors (TCS), which allow for a reduced London Weighting supplement to be paid to those doctors who receive the free accommodation. The reduction in salary that was associated with living in free accommodation in London demonstrated that the provision was a financial benefit. We urge the Review Body to take this into account.

If the Review Body has any further questions about the implications for juniors of the removal of free accommodation we would be only too happy to assist.

Yours sincerely

Mr Ram Moorthy
Chairman
Junior Doctors Committee