The Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

20 December 2017

Dear Prime Minister,

As the representatives of doctors, nursing staff and midwives in the UK, we are deeply concerned by reports that there is support within government for the removal of the Working Time Regulations (WTR) from UK law following the UK’s departure from the European Union.

Dealing with and preventing the effects of excessive working is crucial not only because of the impact on individuals and their families, but also because of the wider consequences it poses to patient safety.

Twenty-five years ago, the phenomenon of health professionals working 90 hour weeks, and the attendant risks this posed, was all too common in the NHS. The worst excesses of these working arrangements were only curtailed following the arrival of EU-derived legislation limiting hours in the form of the WTR.

It is not in the interests of either staff or patients to relax or move away from the safeguarding protections introduced by the WTR, namely the limit of an average 48 hour working week, rest breaks and statutory paid leave, especially when there is, of course, the existing option for all workers to voluntarily opt out of these regulations.
Even with these regulations, we know that fatigue caused by excessive overwork remains an occupational hazard for many staff across the NHS, with tragic and not uncommon reports of road accidents after falling asleep at the wheel.

With health and care services under more pressure than ever before, and staff being called upon to work ever longer hours, what is needed is proper resourcing and investment to increase our workforce, not the removal of safeguards. We noted the commitment in your speech to the Conservative Party Conference, and in recent days, that not only would existing workers’ legal rights be guaranteed in law, but that they would be enhanced under your Government. We urge you not to renege on this commitment: Brexit must not be used as an excuse to overwork any staff group.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Chaand Nagpaul
Council Chair, British Medical Association

Dr Liam Brennan
President of the Royal College of Anaesthetists

Professor Neena Modi
President, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Dr Janet Davies
Chief Executive and General Secretary, Royal College of Nursing

Gill Walton
Chief Executive, Royal College of Midwives

Professor Michael Lavelle-Jones
President, The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh

Mr Michael Burdon
FRCOphth, FRCP(Ed)
President, Royal College of Ophthalmologists

Professor Helen Stokes-Lampard
Chair of RCGP council

Dr Nicola Strickland
President of The Royal College of Radiologists

Dr Taj Hassan
President, Royal College of Emergency Medicine

Cc Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, Secretary of State for Health