Cap on public sector pay

House of Lords short debate
Thursday 13 July 2017

The British Medical Association (BMA) is a voluntary professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care.

Key points

- Staff morale across the health service has been worsened by year on year real-term cuts to pay through the government’s public sector pay cap which is unfair, unacceptable and should be lifted.

- In real terms, doctors pay has significantly declined in the past five years, with junior doctors seeing their income drop by 17%, consultants 14%, and GPs 13%. This has contributed to staff shortages which subsequently impact on patient care.

- The NHS is struggling to attract and retain doctors: a recent BMA survey has found that two-thirds of hospital doctors and almost half of GPs report vacancies in their departments and practices.

- The independence of pay review bodies must be restored and the Government should not dictate the scope of their recommendations.

- Investing in the NHS workforce and providing fair terms and conditions must be a priority for the government to ensure that the NHS will be able to attract and retain the frontline staff needed to deliver safe, high-quality patient care.

NHS pay cap

Year after year of real-term pay cuts have had a damaging impact on the morale of frontline NHS staff at a time when the health service is facing huge recruitment problems across a number of specialities. There are currently chronic shortages and rota gaps across the NHS, with major recruitment problems in certain specialities such as emergency medicine and psychiatry. A recent survey of foundation trainees in the UK found that only 52% were progressing directly into specialty training, this compares to 64% in 2013 and 71% in 2011. In real terms, doctors pay has significantly declined in the past five years, with junior doctors seeing their income drop by 17%, consultants 14%, and GPs 13%. Since 2005, the Office of Man Power Economics’s recent report shows that doctors’ pay overall has decreased by 22%. The government must remove the NHS

---

pay cap in order to retain and attract staff, resolve workforce shortages and ensure safe patient care.

Understaffed and under-resourced hospitals and primary care services are having to manage unprecedented levels of patient demand. Staff across the NHS are working under increasing pressure, in a system unable to cope, in order to ensure that patients receive the level of care which they deserve. These pressures, described by the NHS confederation as ‘intolerable’⁴, have resulted in overworked staff choosing to leave the NHS at a time when it needs them most. A recent BMA survey⁵ found that around two-thirds of hospital doctors have experienced rota gaps in the past 12 months, with 65 per cent of hospital doctors and 48 per cent of GPs reporting vacancies in their departments and practices.

The impact of pay restraint on the public sector has been widely acknowledged, particularly during the General Election campaign where the unsustainability of cuts to public services was recognised by politicians, stakeholders and the public. There is clearly growing support for doctors, nurses and allied health professionals’ message that the public sector pay cap is having a serious impact on levels of patient care due to the impact it is having on staffing levels, that it is unsustainable, and it should be lifted.

In recent years there has been an attempt by government to dictate a remit to supposedly independent pay review bodies. It is essential that pay review bodies are able to provide independent recommendations on pay across the public sector. NHS Providers have also stated that ‘pay restraint must end’ in order to alleviate workforce pressures⁶.

If the government is serious about strengthening patient safety, it would listen to the concerns of the NHS workforce and NHS management, recognise the need to attract and retain doctors to key areas and remove the public sector pay cap which has resulted in NHS staff pay being cut each year. Ultimately the NHS pay cap is unfair, unacceptable and must be lifted.

For further information, please contact:

David Knowles, Senior Public Affairs Officer
T: 020 7383 6520 | M: 07917 041 018 | E dknowles@bma.org.uk

⁴ Niall Dickson, chief executive of the NHS Confederation – 20/05/2017 - www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/20/national-health-service-pay-challenge-workforce
⁶ Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers – 08/05/2017 - www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/08/nhs-staff-quitting-to-work-in-supermarkets-because-of-poor-pay