Reshaping stroke services: pre-consultation

Dear Sir/Madam

The British Medical Association (BMA) is an apolitical independent trade union and professional association representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK. Our mission is we look after doctors so they can look after you. BMA Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to provide initial comments on the pre-consultation on ‘Reshaping stroke services: for better recovery and more lives saved.’

BMA Northern Ireland welcomes the outline of proposed changes for the pathway of stroke services but is concerned that the evidence as outlined in the document is somewhat selective. For example, the time from stroke event to needle time needs to be emphasised rather than door to needle. Linked to this is the physical geography of Northern Ireland and the location of services which has not been detailed in this document.

Our comments are below:

Prevention
The document in section 2 states that many strokes can be avoided and outlines lifestyle factors that play a key role in preventing strokes. Whilst this document is in relation to stroke services, we would welcome a commitment to address the lifestyle factors that cause strokes, thereby reducing the number of people in the first place who need stroke services.
**Staffing levels**
Despite numerous workforce reviews over the years the medical workforce is now at crisis point, with gaps and vacancies affecting the timely delivery of service for patients across all branches of practice. Northern Ireland has the second lowest ratio of doctors across the nations in the UK, with 2.9 doctors per 1000 population. This is below the OECD average of 3.2 doctors per 1000 population.

We therefore question whether the workforce is in place to enable the intentions within reshaping stroke services to be delivered.

**Impact on primary care**
Primary care is in crisis and shifting the provision of services or adding additional services onto general practice will cause considerable strain on an already strained service. Some areas of Northern Ireland are effectively without a local general practice service. This needs urgent consideration and additional resources and staff in place in general practice to enable appropriate services in place for patients.

**Destabilising existing services**
We accept that this pre-consultation document is seeking initial views and does not detail the actual number or location of sites or units that will be needed for stroke services across Northern Ireland and indeed the Republic of Ireland (page 38). The removal of certain services from some acute hospitals could destabilise that hospital and put other services at risk. The proposed transformation agenda, and the lack of an accountable health minister leaves us concerned that decisions will be taken to fulfil a wider agenda that is not clinically driven and not conducive to patient care.

In addition, it is important that the additional / new / replacement services are in place, including the transport infrastructure prior to the closure or the shift of services elsewhere. Too often this does not happen leaving doctors and patient’s frustrated at the slow pace of change.

We hope our comments are helpful and will be reflected in the draft consultation document when published. If you need any further clarification on any of the issues raised, please do not hesitate to contact, Judith Cross, Head of policy and committee services, on 02890269687 or jcross@bma.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Dr John D Woods
BMA NI council chair