Introduction

Doctors have repeatedly told us that they are frustrated and impeded by a focus on political priorities and targets in NHS Scotland. Often this can skew decision-making and overshadow clinical advice.

That is why in the run up to the Scottish Parliament elections in May of this year, BMA Scotland called on all political parties to agree on the need for a review of the current approach to targets.

BMA Scotland believes that the clinical needs of patients should always be the driving force behind patient care.

Whilst performance measurements and frameworks have undoubtedly contributed to significant improvements in the time patients wait to be seen and access certain services we feel the current approach does not provide sufficient flexibility.

Furthermore the top-down, performance management approach currently imposed on already overburdened health service staff working in our hospitals is having a negative impact on culture and work satisfaction, on the leadership role of doctors and most importantly, through all of this, on the quality of care being offered to people in Scotland.

For this reason we have been calling for a review of the current approach to setting and implementing targets and the development of an evidence based approach to driving quality.

BMA Scotland believes that we need to change how we measure and set targets so that we do not skew clinical judgement and allow the flexibility to prioritise patients with the most urgent clinical need.

The BMA therefore welcomes the recent announcement by the Scottish Government that a review of NHS targets will be carried out, with an expert group established and tasked with looking at national target setting.
Clinical priorities and targets

NHS boards are required to meet a number of performance targets and standards set by the Scottish Government. Audit Scotland reports that in 2015, the NHS in Scotland missed seven of its nine key waiting time targets.¹ The report concluded that an ageing population and higher activity levels makes achieving current targets more difficult.

As well as targets potentially skewing how resources are prioritised, the focus created in specific areas as a result of failing to meet certain existing targets can increase pressure elsewhere in the health service and impacts upon the effective management of patient flow.

Furthermore there is currently no way to assess how much health boards are spending to meet performance targets and this raises questions around whether public money is being spent in the most effective way to maximise outcomes for people across Scotland.

Next steps

BMA Scotland supports the announcement of a review of targets, and calls for this review to cover both the current approach to setting and to implementing targets. We would want to see the development of an evidence based approach to driving quality by changing how we set and measure targets with a greater focus on patient outcomes.

It is important that the review considers how measurement and the associated public reporting of health service activity can drive the best use of resources and ensure that the clinical needs of patients are prioritised according to those who have the most urgent medical needs.

It is imperative that doctors are consulted on this issue as they are in a unique position to provide their expertise and knowledge of how the system is currently working and the impact of a target-driven approach.

We want to ensure that the medical workforce within the health service can prioritise and respond to clinical need allowing doctors to use available resources in the way that best secures improved outcomes for patients.

We must review our approach, across the whole health and social care system, to create a genuine focus on achieving the best outcomes for the Scottish population as a whole, managed and led at a local level by doctors and other health care professionals wherever possible.

¹ Audit Scotland (October 2015) *NHS in Scotland 2015* Audit Scotland: Edinburgh
We look forward to the opportunity to inform the review, using the experience of doctors to inform decision-making on improving the outcomes for patients in Scotland and the quality of care and delivery in our health service.

For further information please contact Ruth MacLeod, Head of Strategic Communications and Public Affairs, BMA Scotland. T: 0131 247 3018 M: 07768 005850 E: Rmacleod@bma.org.uk