BMA quarterly survey

Current views from across the medical profession
Quarter 2: June 2017

Public Health and Healthcare
Background

– The BMA’s Public Health and Healthcare function (PHH) manages an online panel of approximately 2,500 member doctors.

– The panel is broadly representative of the main areas of medical practice and is used for quarterly surveys on topical health questions. The survey also includes recurrent questions on workload, morale and work-life balance. These are repeated every quarter.

– Topical issues included in this quarter are questions on patient access, workplace stress, impacts of the EU referendum and rota gaps.

– The survey also allows for additional questions on other issues – if you are a health organisation interested in working with us, contact info.phhd@bma.org.uk
Methodology

– For this quarter, the survey was sent to 1,000 panel members.
– Panel members were emailed a link to the online survey between 23 May and 13 June 2017.
– The response was 422 (a response rate of 42%).
– The following analysis includes comparisons across the largest branches of practice.
Findings

– Perhaps unsurprisingly, and similar to other quarterly surveys, pressure on staff is a key theme across the survey responses. Respondents reported increased stress levels over the past year, while most had rota gaps and vacancies where they work, indicating increased pressure on existing staff. Evidence that non-UK workers have already begun to leave roles (11% of respondents reported co-workers leaving since the EU referendum) risks confounding these pressures in the coming years.

– 67% of hospital doctors reported that there are rota gaps in their departments, while 65% said there were vacancies in their department and 48% of GPs reported GP vacancies where they worked. Many of these vacancies were reported to have gone unfilled for more than six months. These gaps in resourcing indicate a high level of additional pressure on existing staff and may go part of the way in explaining why 61% of respondents have felt increasing stress over the past year.

– 14% of respondents reported noticing a reduction in non-UK applicants for post in their departments, while 11% said that at least one colleague in their department from another EU country has left their post as a result of the UK’s decision to leave the European Union. Although the 11% figure does not necessarily equate to the amount of people who have left since the referendum, a leave rate close to this would represent a significant recruitment challenge. This is especially true in the context of the level of rota gaps.

– Over 70% of respondents thought that it has become more difficult for patients trying to access NHS care over the past 12 months. The key issue behind the deterioration was longer waiting times in several areas. Many respondents referenced longer waiting time for GP appointments.
Respondents: branch of medical practice

‘Other’ doctors include respondents working in medical academia, public health, doctors outside one of the main fields of practice and a small number of unemployed doctors or doctors on a career break.

For the first time, retired doctors are included as a category. When questioned further about their last working post, consultant and GP contractor/principal were most frequently reported.

Question: What grade is your current post?
Respondents: working pattern

About 32% of respondents were working less than full time.

Question: Are you working: full time, less than full time, unemployed, on a career break, on maternity leave, retired?
Patient access
Over the last year, how do you think the level of difficulty faced by patients trying to access NHS care has changed?

Over 70% of respondents believe that it has become more difficult for patients trying to access NHS care over that past 12 months, with only about half of one per cent of respondents believing that it has become less difficult to access care.

Respondents were asked to tell us how they thought patient access to services had worsened over the past 12 months. The most often cited reason for the deterioration in access was longer waiting times for admissions and for GP appointments.
Stress
Stress levels among respondents

The responses to this quarter’s survey indicate a significant and increasing issue of workplace stress, with 61% of respondents reporting that their stress levels have increased over the past year, compared to only 6% who said that they have had a reduction in workplace stress levels.

Half of respondents to this quarter’s survey reported feeling unwell as a result of workplace stress, over the past 12 months.
Rota gaps
67% of respondents report that there are currently rota gaps in the department in which they work.

This finding points to increased pressure on existing staff who are likely to have to increase their own workload to compensate for these rota gaps. This type of increased pressure may be one of the reasons why 61% of respondents reported that their stress levels have increased over the past year.
Hospital vacancies

Similar to the responses indicating that there were a large number of departments affected by rota gaps, 65% of hospital doctor respondents reported that there are medical doctor vacancies in their departments.

Although some level of vacancies will be a feature of all departments, 72% of those reporting vacancies said that at least one of those vacancies have not been filled for 6 months or more, indicating a relatively high prevalence of long-term hospital doctor vacancies.

11% of those reporting vacancies in their department even said that there were 5 or more doctor vacancies in their department that have not been filled for 6 months or more.
GP vacancies

Similar to the situation with hospital vacancies, a relatively large (48%) proportion of GP respondents reported doctor vacancies in the practices in which they work.

Although some level of vacancies are normal, 69% of those reporting vacancies said that at least one of those vacancies have not been filled for 6 months or more, indicating a relatively high prevalence of longer-term GP vacancies.

Are there GPs vacancies in the practice you work in?

- Yes: 48%
- No: 52%

How many of these vacancies have not been filled for more than 6 months?

- None: 69%
- One or more: 25%
- Don't know: 6%
EU referendum
Change in non-UK applications

There is a mixed picture when it comes to the change in the number of non-UK applications respondents have seen, with most respondents answering don’t know, 14% saying that non-UK applications have fallen and 28% saying that these applications have not decreased.

Question: Since the UK voted in the referendum in 2016 to leave the EU, have you noticed a decline in applications for positions in your department from non-UK nationals?
11% of respondents indicated that colleagues have departed as a result of the decision to leave the European Union. Although this does not point to a specific number of those leaving, it does seem relatively high considering the UK has not left the EU yet.

A relatively significant portion of respondents reporting individuals leaving their departments as a result of the referendum at this early stage points to the potentially large recruitment issues the NHS may face as the UK leaves the European Union.

Question: Since the UK voted in the referendum in 2016 to leave the EU, have any colleagues in your department who are from other countries in the EU now departed from the UK as a result of that decision?
Current morale
This quarter, 44% of respondents described their morale as being low or very low, compared to only 19% of respondents who described morale as being high or very high. Over the past 12 months, the proportion of respondents reporting low or very low morale has fluctuated around 50%. This quarter there was a slight reduction (1 percentage point) in those describing their morale as very low or low, but a concurrent reduction of 2 percentage points of those describing their morale as high or very high.

The significant difference between the morale of those who are retired and the average of those working prompted the exclusion of retirees from this slide, in order to gain a more accurate picture of the morale of those currently working.

**Question:** Taking everything into account, how would you describe your current level of morale?
Average morale by branch of practice

Using a 5-point scale
(1 = very low, 3 = moderate, 5 = very high)
the mean morale scores can be compared across branches of practice.

All branches of practice average morale scores are relatively similar and all are below moderate with a range between the averages of only 0.4 – with GPs reporting the lowest morale and consultants the highest.

Question: Taking everything into account, how would you describe your current level of morale?
Morale over time remains low for all branches of practice.

The morale level for GPs has decreased this quarter, returning towards its average position over the past two years.

SAS and junior doctor morale also decreased this quarter, whereas there was a small increase in consultant morale, although consultant morale overall remains below moderate.
Work-life balance
Satisfaction with work-life balance

Mean satisfaction with work-life balance is similar across all branches of practice and remains close to neutral on average.

Consultant: 5.8
SAS: 5.8
Average: 5.5
Junior doctor in training: 5.3
GP: 5.2

Question: Overall, how satisfied are you with your work-life balance nowadays? (Please give your answer on a scale of nought to 10, where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely satisfied')
Satisfaction with work-life balance overall is moderate, with SAS and consultant grades only slightly above the neutral point of 5.5; and GPs and junior doctors below the neutral point on average.

Compared to the last survey, there has been a decrease in SAS doctor morale.
Current workload
Consistent with all previous editions of the Quarterly survey, this quarter shows that GPs remain the most likely to report working outside their regular hours "very often".

SAS doctor respondents show the lowest proportion working outside their regular hours "very often"; this is consistent with their relatively positive responses for the work-life balance question.