Hospital consultants – background briefing [England only]

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Note: This paper is intended as background information for the media. It is not intended as a comprehensive BMA policy paper.

Applicability: England only

What is a consultant?

A consultant is the most senior grade of doctor working in a hospital, although some consultants work outside hospitals. They are highly trained and skilled, with vast expertise gained through a lengthy and extensive training programme.

As the most senior specialist doctors, they have ultimate responsibility for the care of patients referred to them. In addition to their clinical work in treating and caring for patients, they also take the lead role in developing services for patients, supervise and train other doctors, undertake research to improve treatments, and oversee the running of clinical services. Their workload is often very high, demanding and complex.

The consultant career path

It usually takes around 12 years to become a consultant. Most doctors begin their medical training at medical school where they spend five years as an undergraduate at university. This is then followed by two years of general training in hospital on a Foundation Programme during which time they will be known as foundation doctors. Foundation training is made up of F1 (foundation year one) and F2 (foundation year two).

After this point, a doctor’s training will vary depending on their chosen speciality of medicine and career path. To become a consultant, a doctor must begin a specialty training programme. These usually take between five and seven years to complete. More information about the consultant career path is available here.

The consultant contract (England)

The current consultant contract was implemented in 2003. Since 2015, the BMA has been in discussions with the Department of Health and NHS Employers to discuss potential changes to the contract.
At present, these discussions are still ongoing. For the latest information, please visit the [BMA’s website](http://www.bma.org.uk).

**Consultant shortages**

While the total number of consultants has increased in recent years, demand is outstripping supply in some specialties such as emergency medicine, acute general medicine, radiology and psychiatry. Shortages in these specialties can be caused by several factors. Demand may fluctuate because of changing demographics or changes in how services are delivered. However some specialties are less attractive to newly qualified doctors and the Keogh review, for example, found that too few doctors choose to specialise in emergency medicine because of the nature of the work, the working conditions and work-life balance issues. More information on clinical shortages is available [here](http://www.bma.org.uk).

**Current arrangements for consultant pay**

Progression up the pay scale depends on satisfactory completion of duties, based on an annual job planning process. For the first four years of service as a consultant, progression up the pay scale takes place annually, and after that it is every five years. Typically, doctors reach the top of the scale only after around 20 years of service as a consultant. Government pay freezes and sub-inflationary annual increases in recent years have limited salary levels.

**Clinical Excellence Awards (CEAs)**

CEAs are intended to recognise and reward those consultants who contribute the highest levels of medical service. The [Advisory Committee on Clinical Excellence Awards (ACCEA)](http://www.bma.org.uk) is the independent body that administers CEAs. They recognise and reward NHS consultants and academic GPs who perform over and above the standard expected of their role.

To be considered for an award applicants, have to demonstrate achievements in developing and delivering high quality patient care, and commitment to the continuous improvement of the NHS. This could mean delivering a high quality service, performing a leadership role, enhancing clinical quality or cost-effectiveness, making a personal contribution to a national or international health policy development, or taking forward medical research.

There are two kinds of CEAs, both of which are paid as additional salary. Local level CEAs are awarded by local employers and national level CEAs reward consultants for their contribution at a national level, and are managed by ACCEA.

For further information, please email [mediaoffice@bma.org.uk](mailto:mediaoffice@bma.org.uk) or call 020 7383 6448.