Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

13 December 2019

Dear Prime Minister,

Re: Key challenges and solutions for the NHS

I would like to take this opportunity, as Chair of Council of the British Medical Association, to acknowledge the pledges which you and your party made during the election campaign and to outline our members’ key priorities for your new government.

Without adequate investment the NHS will not be sustainable, and patient access to quality care will be reduced to an unacceptable level. The BMA called in our manifesto for annual increases of 4.1% for the NHS based on IFS (Institute for Fiscal Studies) data. We are concerned that the Conservative pledges, which the IFS has estimated equate to an increase in total health spending of 3.1% per year between 2019-20 and 2023-24, will lead to a shortfall by 2023/24 of £6.2 billion. As you will have seen through some of your hospital visits during the election campaign, adequate investment in the NHS and its workforce is vital, and without it we risk patients being let down by the services they and their families depend on.

The NHS is under unprecedented pressure, with waiting times for A&E care, cancer treatment and planned operations dangerously high. General practice is experiencing a fall in full time equivalent GPs, leading to GP waiting times exceeding two weeks earlier this year, and unsustainable workload pressures for GPs and their practice teams. While your pledge to increase workforce numbers reflect the dire situation, they fail to reflect the realities of recruitment and the time it takes to train new clinicians.

Within the current workforce crisis punitive pensions policies are the greatest immediate threat to capacity and, consequently, to patient services. We had hoped that your manifesto would commit to reforming pension taxation policies, rather than just an intention to hold a review of the doctors’ pensions ‘taper problem’ within the first 30 days. The review, which the BMA expects to be involved in, must focus on action by the Treasury to address the cumulative impact of the taper, annual allowance and lifetime allowance. We will be writing to the Chancellor outlining in detail our solutions to the problem and requesting a meeting. The BMA is absolutely clear that the only solution to the current unjustifiable problem impacting doctors and ultimately patient
waiting times, is removal of the taper and annual allowance for defined benefit schemes such as the NHS Pension Scheme. This is in line with recommendations by the government’s own advisory body, the Office of Tax Simplification. Other solutions such as increasing the threshold income level, scrapping the taper and pension flexibilities will not completely solve the problem. The recent NHS England programme to refund tax demonstrates that the pension taxation system is broken and while it may provide some short-term support, it cannot be viewed as more than an interim step towards a final resolution. Without this resolution, doctors will have no choice but to continue to reduce the amount of work they do for the NHS, or leave it entirely, to avoid unexpected tax bills.

To retain doctors, it is vital that they work within a supportive culture within safe and manageable workloads. As part of this we are calling for accountability for safe staffing levels across UK health services to be enshrined in legislation governing the NHS as a vital step to safeguard patients. Retention measures must also include pay uplifts that value our medical workforce and address the historic underpayment that doctors have experienced.

We are supportive of your commitment for new legislation regarding ending competitive tendering in the NHS in England which the BMA has long called for. We believe that this must include measures to reinstate the NHS as the preferred provider of services which would provide more coordinated and efficient use of resources.

Prevention measures, such as continuation of the sugar levy to tackle obesity, smoking cessation services and alcohol harm reduction services must be at the heart of the healthcare system and prioritised by your government with sufficient funding to undo previous cuts. While importantly preventing many health conditions and leading to better patient outcomes, action in this area would also reduce health service uptake and in turn reduce system pressures.

Brexit is clearly at the forefront of your agenda. The BMA has consistently warned about the impact of Brexit on patients, the medical workforce, and health services across the UK and Europe. It is vital that these concerns are properly addressed and the government mitigates the threats to the health service and the profession. It is also imperative that in any event we avoid a no deal situation.

I look forward to engaging with you and your government over the coming weeks to resolve the pensions crisis and to develop a strong working relationship which will allow us to share our members’ expertise and to help make the NHS a strong and sustainable source of pride and support for NHS workers and patients across the country.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Chaand Nagpaul CBE
BMA Council Chair