SAS committee podcast transcript

**Dr Rajesh Kumar**

**Staff, associate specialist and specialty doctors committee**

R B,

It is with immense pleasure and pride that I am able to speak to you as chair of the BMA’s Staff, Associate Specialist and Specialty doctor committee.

When Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon he said that it was *‘one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind’*. The new SAS contracts that our committee have negotiated are similarly a giant leap towards making the SAS grades a positive career path.

For quite a few years, SAS doctors have been asking for the re-opening of the Associate Specialist or equivalent grade and for an improvement in the salary structure of Speciality Doctors. Our members asked and we delivered! In fact, we have delivered even better! We were asked to reopen the Associate Specialist grade, we have delivered the Specialist grade thus providing career progression for SAS doctors. This is in addition to a new Specialty doctor grade with a much flatter and improved pay structure with many safeguards built into the contract.

Following months of high-level negotiations between the BMA and administrations in England, Wales and Norther Ireland, NHS employers and the Department of Health, SASC was able to secure agreement on these new contracts virtually in record time of one year despite the setback of Covid with clockwork precision. This virtual negotiation was new and unchartered territory and by no means was it easy.

Both contracts enshrine important provisions and safeguards, protecting work-life balance, giving greater recognition to on-call work, providing enhanced access to shared parental leave and a limit to weekend working. *All this in addition to better pay of course. These contracts have made a provision for an Advocate role to deal with the never ending menace of bullying and harassment of SAS doctors which is disproportionately high compared to other groups of doctors.* The Advocate role will seek to address this huge issue. In addition we were able to win principle of choice for those doctors who do not want to move to the new contract.

Attaining these improvements did not come overnight, and I would like to personally thank my predecessor, colleague and friend Amit Kochhar for his years of tireless effort and dedication during his tenure as SASC chair, all of which paved the way to the opening of last year’s negotiations. *The contributions of the entire negotiating team were immense and need to be appreciated.*

I would also like to thank our council chair, Chaand Nagpaul, for the immense and unwavering support he showed the SAS committee throughout our endeavours.

Over and above, I must thank all SAS doctors and state, yet again, how immensely proud I am that an overwhelming majority voted to endorse these new terms.

I firmly believe that these new contracts will form the starting points of a continuing journey into further recognition and respect for the SAS branch of practice. We have to ensure that employers offer these posts rather than exploiting doctors by giving them ad hoc titles.

This year’s DDRB award of 3% pay uplift once again makes a mockery of the valiant efforts of doctors in fighting the Covid pandemic. On one hand it is insufficient and on the other hand it has denied this award to those SAS doctors looking to transfer to the new contracts.

Despite the DDRB’s specific comment that doctors on multiple-year pay deals should also be recognised for their contributions to the pandemic response, the Government has failed to reward these doctors for their hard work and contributions during Covid-19.

SAS doctors have worked incredibly hard to respond to the pandemic and many are still working in Covid job plans and rotas, which makes the lack of recognition even more disappointing. What’s worse, by applying the award to the older contracts and offering nothing to the new contracts, the Government have made it comparatively less attractive for people to transfer. In the context of creating a modern contract that we want SAS doctors to transition to, this is clearly an error. We are calling upon the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to right that wrong.

COVID has and is still affecting all of us like never before. It has tested all of us like nothing that any of us have experienced before. Like all branches of practice, SAS doctors have played a critical role in responding to this unprecedented crisis, demonstrating that our individual and collective skills and experience have been invaluable to patients and the NHS.

One of the by-products of the pandemic has been the exposure of inequalities, both social and racial resulting in a disproportionate impact on both patients and healthcare staff from Black and minority ethnic groups.

BAME doctors, who make up 44 per cent of the NHS' workforce, have so far accounted for 95 per cent of all deaths among doctors who have contracted the disease.

Stories from BAME doctors who continue to feel marginalised and less confident about safety arrangements and PPE in their workplaces make it even more saddening and unacceptable.

RB, these inequalities cannot be allowed to either continue or be ignored. SASC, along with the rest of the association, look forward to a full enquiry in the government’s handling of COVID. In doing so however we owe it to our patients, our colleagues and ourselves to ensure that those in Government listen to the medical profession and the NHS, and provide both with all the resources and support needed to recover and refit, and to continue to deliver amazing care.

With the continuing success of the vaccination roll-out, we can at last begin to look towards a post-pandemic future.

The SAS charters, first introduced in England back in 2014, have since been replicated across all four home nations, Developed as a framework to support SAS doctors with career development and improving access to workplace opportunities such as leadership roles and autonomous working, the charters have proven their worth.

We cannot however remain complacent, and need to remain vigilant of instances where employers are not honouring the terms they signed up to and continue to fight for betterment of workplace conditions for SAS doctors.

The pressures of COVID have accentuated and exacerbated the instances of conditions such as anxiety, depression and burnout, more so amongst SAS doctors due to the effects of bullying and harassment on mental health. The BMA’s charter for mental wellbeing provides a framework designed to encourage positive change within workplaces and shows Trusts how they can go about building a supportive culture and a wellbeing strategy for their staff. As a committee, we hugely welcome this charter.

This year, SASC hosted its first virtual conference for SAS doctors which was highly successful, and we managed to debate all of the motions on the agenda. One of the many motions passed at the conference was to review the process and requirement for awarding practising privileges during COVID and beyond when there will be contracts between independent sector providers and individual trusts to ensure there are no further delays in treating patients.

In order to clear the backlog from the pandemic, SAS doctors must be granted access to provide healthcare in these settings and be recognised for their ability to work autonomously and see NHS patients in these facilities. SASC will be lobbying the NHS to engage on this crucial issue.

In closing today, I would like to thank all my colleagues on SASC in all the nations, and staff in national negotiations and representation for all of their hard work and support over the past year.

The new contractual settlements that we have secured are an important milestone, but they do not symbolise the end of our journey or our endeavours. *Our challenges with implementation of this new contract are immense and although the success of the contract is a factor we have to ensure it benefits most if not all SAS doctors and addresses the challenge posed by the DDRB award.*

*RB, SASC has always said that we are one profession and now more than ever before, we have to stand together. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We are only as strong as we are united and as weak as we are divided. So, please support and stay united!*

Thank you.