

ARM SPEECH 2021 – TOM BLACK

The last year has been very difficult for doctors and indeed for all healthcare workers throughout the world.

In Northern Ireland our doctors have continued to work very hard during the ongoing Covid pandemic to make sure that our patients get the best care possible.

BMA Northern Ireland committees have tried to ensure doctors have the best PPE available to them and that the environments in which they work are safe.

We have continued to promote the BMA well-being services for members and their families. This service is increasingly important given the extreme physical and psychological demands on doctors throughout this pandemic period.

What the Covid pandemic has also laid bare in Northern Ireland is the historic underfunding of health and the pressures on the workforce – we do not have enough staff to run our health services.

We all knew those pressures were there but concerns were frequently brushed aside. . The pandemic has made clear the need for long-term planning with respect to the workforce remuneration, staff numbers throughout the service and premises. We have seen many plans and reports produced on how to transform our health service, but with people waiting years for first appointments let alone treatment we cannot continue to go round in circles. We need to take action now.

This needs to go hand-in-hand with a significant funding commitment throughout the health service if we are to even begin to deal with the long waiting lists in Northern Ireland.

BMA Northern Ireland has now finalised its response to the O’Hara report and the DoH consultation process. The recommendation for an individual duty of candour with criminal sanction is not the best way forward. We feel this would create a blame and sanction culture with resultant defensive practice. What we need is to encourage a learning culture which supports doctors particularly our younger doctors who would be put off by a culture of blame and sanction.

BMA Northern Ireland worked with BMA in England, Scotland and Wales on our submissions to the DDRB process. It is clear that there has been significant pay erosion of approximately 30% to doctors remuneration over the last decade or more. This, in combination with the many issues around pensions and taxation, has eroded pay for doctors particularly when compared to similar professions. In Northern Ireland BMA is advocating strongly with the Department of Health for local mitigations and trying to ensure that all doctors have the information they need to make individual decisions on their pensions.

It is important to recognise the successes we’ve had over the last year. We have worked to look after patients in a service under severe pressure. We have worked longer and harder

for our patients than ever before, in many cases putting ourselves at risk. The vaccination programme in Northern Ireland has been a great success, delivered in part by our GPs and by returning doctors, it has helped protect our community from this virus.

We have also seen the opening of our second medical school at Ulster University at Magee College and we look forward to engaging with the medical students there.

Our SAS committee has had great success in their contract negotiations and we look forward to seeing the implementation of the new SAS contract in Northern Ireland.

Our medical students committee have continued with their outreach programme to attract candidates from underrepresented areas and we are very proud of this work.

Our GP committee have worked tirelessly for members throughout the pandemic to reduce pressure on members by continuing the contract freeze and by promoting in the media that general practice is very much open for business and has been throughout the pandemic.

We continue to work with and for individual doctors in their workplace to ensure that they are safe and have the best terms and conditions possible.

The year ahead will be another difficult year. We will continue to deal with Covid and waiting lists and all the stresses and strains that these circumstances bring. We will engage as much as we can with our Health Minister and our Department of Health to address the issues members have and to try and change our health care system to one that meets the needs of the population.

I'd like to thank all members for their hard work for the patients in Northern Ireland. I would like to thank all of the BMA staff in Northern Ireland for a huge amount of excellent work that they've achieved over the last year working for the members in Northern Ireland. This has been done in a very difficult environment of remote working and I think we all look forward to getting back around a table and meeting up in person again.