

Speech by Dr Phil White, BMA GP committee UK chair, to the UK Conference of Representatives of Local Medical Committees

York, Tuesday 10 May 2022

Conference,

I can honestly say I have never felt so proud to address a group of people – to share a room with a group of people – as I do today.

It has been an extraordinary two years for our profession...

For each and every one of us...

All of our lives have changed.

I am proud because when our patients needed us most, we changed our ways of working almost overnight. We embraced technology to give patients the best access possible and we put ourselves in harm's way for those who could only see us face-to-face.

General Practice has maintained services, working harder than ever for our communities, despite what the press and the Westminster Government think.

Methods of remote consultation were rolled out at speed, enabling us to cope with patient demands with minimum health risks to both patients and staff.

Many colleagues, through chronic ill health, age or ethnicity were in those high-risk groups that needed self-isolation.

Remote consultation enabled them to continue working and contributing for the benefit of patients.

Yet we were told by the media and politicians that we were shut?

We pay tribute to colleagues who have worked tirelessly in our hospitals to preserve life.

But we must remember that the vast majority of Covid cases were managed at home by our teams, using many innovative means, at both practice and cluster or PCN level.

Red hubs and home oxygen saturation meters became the norm.

Yet we were told by the media and politicians that we were shut?

Paediatric immunisation levels maintained at high levels.

Kick-starting the roll out of Covid vaccinations in the community to vulnerable people.

A flu vaccination campaign that set a new record in 2020-21, and then exceeded that record in 2021-22.

Yet we were told by the media and politicians that we were shut?

Why did we restrict access?

Because four Governments legislated it.

It became law that numbers coming through our surgeries should be restricted.

There were distancing restrictions, increased levels of disinfection, use of Personal Protective Equipment, and windows wide open.

We have three Governments who accept that the restrictions were for patient and staff safety.

But one Government has sought to blame General Practice for this. You don't need me to tell you which one. Their reputation speaks for itself.

I am proud to stand before you – to stand with you – today, because you responded to an unprecedented situation with the utmost vigour and compassion and with our populations in our hearts every step of the way.

Tragically, some of our colleagues lost their lives to Covid-19.

In March, the families of many of these much-loved doctors gathered at BMA House where tributes were paid to their loved ones. We will forever remember the immense legacy they leave.

Conference, general practice was in crisis before this pandemic.

We have given everything to weather the storm of the past two years.

Now we face a daunting, exhausting – and growing – mountain of unmet need in our communities.

We have thousands more patients on our practice lists.

We regularly break records for numbers of appointments booked and patient contacts.

And we have to do all of this with a dwindling workforce and our hands tied behind our back by a lack of resource, the endless cuts in community services and blockages across secondary care.

The workforce crisis we face in general practice is particularly severe.

At a recent launch of a campaign to Rebuild General Practice, orchestrated by the BMA and the GPDF, the starkness of the situation was clear...

It appears things have got so bad that the BMA and Jeremy Hunt were sharing a stage – campaigning side-by-side.

If our politicians don't listen now – when everything we know and understand turns upside down like this – when will they?

While our personal and working worlds have become increasingly difficult, so too does the wider political landscape both at home and abroad.

My heart goes out, in particular, to our friends and colleagues in Ukraine who are trying to keep themselves safe – and trying to help those who need care the most – in environments most of us would not even witness in our worst nightmares.

In the face of so much uncertainty in our communities, in our countries, and across the world it has never been more important for the UK GPC to be a strong, stable and steadfast voice for the profession, for the independent contractor model, and for our values of care and compassion.

However, GPCUK needs to change.

Such is the diversity of contracts across the four nations that it no longer has a negotiating role, and, other than education, there is little commonality across the nations.

We have been in discussion for some time about such changes, and a working group has drafted the basis for such change.

Part has been accepted by GPC UK at its last meeting, but we need to flesh out the details.

We need to look at a much leaner committee, an oversight group for the daughter committees, that can respond rapidly to issues.

This is what we did over Covid, with regular four chairs' monthly meetings that allowed us to learn from each other.

We need a compact committee, that focusses on pan UK issues and does not get bogged down over single country issues.

We intend pursuing these changes over the next 12 months.

Conference, I have never been so proud as to stand in front of you today - to look out across this room and see so many colleagues who have given so much for their communities during unprecedented moments in our history.

But I want you to be proud of your UK GPC, too. I know we can do much better. I want that journey to start today.

Conference, I move.