

UK doctors speak out against cuts in NHS

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Doctors attending the British Medical Association's representative meeting in Bournemouth International Centre June 25-28 expressed anger over government attacks on health care.

Dr Amar Latif, from the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading, said, "I think the industrial action was necessary as unfortunately the doctors were pushed into a situation like that. Myself, and many of my colleagues, were very uneasy about taking the action. We would not have taken it unless it was absolutely necessary.

"The government is still refusing to enter meaningful negotiations. I urge the government to take heed of the strong message doctors sent out on that day.

"I think our industrial action was successful. A large number of doctors took part. The government is very childish to suggest that most operations, clinics and so forth still happened on the day. Our aim was never to make patients suffer. Our aim was to send a strong message to the government. I think we've done that.

"It is unsurprising what the media is doing. The media is talking all about doctors' selfishness. What you have to remember is that actually we have to protect the rights of our patients not only currently, but in the future, making sure we attract the highest calibre of doctors into the profession. A package of pay and pension which is not very attractive is seriously detrimental. We will see in the future that a large percentage of potential applicants will stay away from medicine because it does not seem to be rewarding for the effort you have to put in.

"Already a lot of training posts remain unfilled and there is a high dropout rate for medicine. This is going

to have very serious safety implications and patients' experience will be a lot further diminished.

"We supported the last strike over pensions launched by the public sector workers, although the union did not strike along with them. Wider cuts taking place currently are disastrous for the National Health Service. The government has embarked on a dangerous cause and one which will be very damaging to the NHS in the long run. It is very important that the government looks to reverse many of the things they are trying to do with the Health and Social Care Bill.

"The majority of cuts in the NHS are yet to bite. When the cuts under the bill take effect you will really see the problems nationally."

A junior emergency medicine doctor at Newham General Hospital, East London, said, "I think it was important that the doctors made a stand against the government's proposed changes to pensions. I regret that the BMA did not take a stand on previous misdealings by the government such as the Health and Social Care Bill. It would have been more appropriate to take action first against the bill and then against the pension changes.

"I don't think that one-off strike actions will change any of the government policies. In terms of defending their rights and conditions related to work and pensions, doctors should align themselves with teachers, civil servants and others. I think that is the best way forward.

"I am quite young and this is the first time in my life I've been exposed to this kind of thing. I know that there was a good show of force in the last November industrial action of the public sector workers [over

pension changes], but I don't know exactly what good it did. At least it demonstrated to the public that people are against the social reforms of this government. I don't think what the BMA has done so far has shown any strength. We do need to do more.

"This is the first time I am attending the Annual Representative Meeting of the BMA. I take away the fact that we demonstrated some strength by showing the BMA leadership that some of what they did in regard to the bill was inadequate and they should have done more. And there was an important victory in a motion just now in relation to defending national pay and conditions against the [imposition of] local pay and conditions.

"Government claims that there is no money in the pension pot are simply not true. It is well documented that there is a surplus. However, it would be wrong as doctors to solely focus on the pension dispute. It is important to defend pensions but also the NHS, which is being eroded as a public service, giving way to the privatisation of services."

Michael J is a mental health doctor in the Midlands:

"I came down here today with a friend hoping to see some proposals from the BMA but they are pretty hopeless. They are not really a trade union, more a professional association, but even the proper trade unions have let the government get their way with the pension's dispute. They are just sitting to one side whilst the government destroys the whole idea of public service. They are handing over the welfare state, which our forefathers created, to their chums in the City of London and the unions go along with it.

"So many parts of the health service have been privatised. Dentistry, care for the elderly, child care. The list goes on. And we've all heard what has happened there. Astronomical increases in charges, mistreatment and abuses. And then there is the whole issue of the hospitals unable to maintain their commitments under the PFI [private finance initiative] schemes. People warned that financing new hospitals this way would lead to trouble but now we are seeing them go under because they can't pay back the loans.

"I really fear for the future of the NHS. The government said the NHS was 'safe with us' at the last election but they are liars. They are not really interested in it. In fact, I think they hate the idea of anything that is for the public good. It makes me sick the way they fawn around the likes of Rupert Murdoch. The whole David Cameron and [former *News of the World* editor] Rebekah Brooks episode was disgusting. Labour's Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were just as bad.

"I agree with you that we can't continue like this. I suppose some sort of independent committees are necessary and the idea of socialism being talked about too."



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