Holding on to medical students and junior doctors

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The strikes over the new junior doctor contract and low morale are having a damaging effect on medical students’ and junior doctors’ attitudes and willingness to work in the NHS. In this opinion piece, Oliver Ralph gives his perspective and describes how it has impacted his view of his future.

In 2015 and 2016 issues surrounding the imposition of a new junior doctor contract led to significant concern about the possibility of an increasing loss of doctors from the NHS to jobs overseas. At the time a survey found that 72% (4150 in total) of participating junior doctors planned to leave the UK and practice abroad if the contract came into effect. The strike action in response to the new contract (Figure 1) left a bad taste in everyone’s mouths. Doctors go to medical school so that they can care for patients, not stand on the streets protesting about pay and conditions and the potential impact on patient safety. However, words are very different to actions: GMC figures indicated that during the summer of contract rows 6673 junior doctors entered specialist training, a similar number to the previous summer.

According to a BMA study, Brexit is also having an impact, with 11% of doctors reporting having colleagues that have left the NHS as a direct result and an additional 14% noticing a drop in non-UK applicants for departmental positions. When answering the question of why a junior doctor would move overseas, both Brexit and the new contract have a role. My opinion is that neither is a strong enough deterrent from the NHS to make such a large life choice, yet they may form part of a larger picture.

Pay differentials
On 16 June 2017, 16 institutions wrote to the prime minister highlighting that the NHS pay cap, which limits pay rises to 1% until 2019, was behind the recent recruitment difficulties of the NHS. The recent report of the Review Body on Doctors’ and Dentists’ Remuneration (DDRB) stated that junior doctors born in the 1990s will prioritise work-life balance, locum for additional money, may work overseas and take breaks - all of which should be taken into account when determining salary. The BMA responded by saying that such generalisations undermined junior doctors and give a justification for a low salary.

The average basic pay for a first-year resident in the United States is $51 000 (approximately £39 000) compared with £22 600 as a foundation doctor in the UK. This is a considerable difference for a young working professional with student debt. Medicine is not a career people undertake for money, but it can clearly be a factor in the decision-making process for junior doctors looking at their career pathway.

Romanticised NHS
If we are constantly told by other doctors and the media that ‘the NHS is on the verge of collapse’, then as
young students and doctors we are likely to start believing it. Why would a young professional want to work in a ‘collapsing’ system?

The NHS relies heavily on a romanticised ideal about care that is free at the point of need for all, that is its clearest selling point. I worry that this may not be enough in itself and that the NHS needs to work on its issues in order to be attractive to junior doctors. As of December 2017, the NHS had over 100,000 unfilled vacancies.\(^9\) The result is that a higher proportion of posts need to be filled by EU and international doctors. A report by the GMS puts this number at 9% of posts with up to 25% in some specialties.\(^{10}\) This is surely an indication that the UK has become a less attractive place to work, and is reinforced by the fact that 6000 fewer overseas junior doctors registered with the GMC in 2017 compared to 2011.\(^{10}\) A recent survey by the BMA found that 43% of doctors were considering moving abroad, with a further 23% unsure. This was followed up by a repeat survey of 1700 doctors, which found figures of 45% and 29% respectively.\(^{11}\)

**Decision time**

This is where I come clean. I am a medical student and am planning to take up a surgical residency post in the USA. My American girlfriend is in my class in medical school and at the end of our training we need to practice in the same location. Naturally, one of us is going to need to relocate permanently to either the USA or the UK, meaning that we both have to gain insight into each system in order to make an informed decision. We looked at the whole picture - the new junior doctor contract, the strikes, the pay, the low morale among all staff - and we chose the USA. We based our decision on the fact that although the NHS is great for patients, it is less good for the doctors that work within it.

**References**

4. Rimmer A. One in 10 doctors have European colleagues that have left the UK because of Brexit, says BMA. *BMJ careers*. 29 June 2017 (http://careers.bmj.com/careers/advice/One_in_10_doctors_have_European_colleagues_who_have_left_the_UK_because_of_Brexit%2C_says_BMA; accessed 5 June 2018).