Doctors defend online system for allocating junior doctor posts

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Doctors have spoken out to defend the computer system criticised last week for its lack of security and its failure to match one tenth of UK final year medical students with training posts. They claim that the new scheme (see www.newdoctor.org) is fairer and more transparent than the old interview based system and that teething problems are minor and to be expected.

A letter in last Saturday's *Times* has sparked a fierce media debate over the suitability of the online selection procedure developed by the modernising medical careers scheme to place final year medical students into the first year of the NHS foundation programme (4 March, p 22).

The letter, signed by 84 medical professors and senior clinicians, criticised the scheme as "a process that has been implemented without adequate consultation and without regard to pleas from the medical profession to continue interviews to select candidates for medical training."

Professor Nicholas Wright, the warden of Barts and The London, Queen Mary's School of Medicine and Dentistry and one of the letter's signatories, is reported to have called for those responsible for the scheme to resign (www.e-health-insider.com).

The online form, which students complete in their final year, contains six fields in which applicants have to list examples of teamwork, leadership, compliance with guidelines, as well as their academic achievements and their reasons for the applying for particular posts. Applicants can list up to 40 posts for which they would like to be considered. Their forms are then anonymised and scored, and students are allocated to posts.

Of 6035 students applying for posts through the system this year, 660 have failed to secure a place and will need to go through a second round of applications. Critics of the scheme are concerned that a number of high flying students have not yet found jobs; that the form relies too heavily on how well students can talk up their strengths and is not properly

scrutinised; and that the process provides no opportunity for endorsing excellence.

Robert Goss, a final year medical student at the Royal Free and University College London Medical School, who uncovered a lack of security at the scheme's site – by accessing a friend's application and editing her references – was "astonished" by the poor organisation of the scheme.

The part of the site that Mr Goss accessed has since been shut down and is being investigated. Mr Goss, however, has become so disillusioned with the process that he is applying for jobs in the city at the same time as going through the second round of applications after failing to secure a suitable post the first time round.

Professor Nicholas Wright has called on those who devised the scheme to resign

"I feel very undervalued by this system. I am the fifth doctor in two generations in my family, I have always wanted to be a doctor, and it's very sad that I am thinking about putting my stethoscope away," he told the *BMJ*. "Taking out interviews from the applications process is going to turn medical education and medical care mediocre. Central to doctors' training is communication and when consultants don't have a say who comes into their team that communication is lost."

Other students have complained that they were not properly briefed about how the scheme worked and have jeopardised their chances of a placement by listing the most popular posts on their applications rather than a mix of prestigious hospitals and those thought to be less so. Nearly 560 students are reported to have signed against the new scheme on an online petition that calls for academic achievements to be given greater value (www.ipetitions.com/campaigns/TheDoctorlottery).

But supporters of the scheme are insisting that it offers advantages and that all students will have jobs to go to in August. Andrew Long, the chairman of the National Association of Clinical Tutors, replied to the letter in the *Times*: "The [current] process was equitable and transparent, which cannot be said for an interview system that has historically been paternalistic and biased. The logistics of 6035 interviews would also have a significant impact on healthcare delivery" (8 March, p 18).

He told the *BMJ* that interviews become important later in a medical career, but that for foundation it "doesn't matter if you have a job at a district general hospital or a centre of excellence." The problems of lack of security and poor understanding about how the scheme works are to be expected in the launch year of any new system for allocation training places, Dr Long added.

Kirsty Lloyd, the head of the BMA's Medical Students Committee, defended the scheme's robustness saying that 10-20% of forms are checked more rigorously than originally planned. "The suggestion that hospitals are now staffed by 'incompetent juniors' who have 'got jobs that they can't do' on the basis of being able to 'tell a good story' on their application forms borders on the pernicious," she wrote in a letter (*Times* 8 March, p 18). "The quality of undergraduate education in the UK is world class. There are clearly some important problems with the new system that need to be looked at urgently. However, it is right that students are selected on the basis of their academic success as well as the broad range of skills developed at medical school."

Graham Winyard, chair of

the Conference of Postgraduate Medical Deans, said, "Much has been made of the loss of interviews as part of the national process. In fact many deaneries and medical schools have not used interviews for preregistration house officer appointments for several years."

Kirsty Lloyd: "It is right that students are selected on their academic success and a broad range of skills"

In a statement, the conference explained that the use of online application is for handling applications and not for selecting students. The scoring of students is not done by computer but by deanery and medical school panels from the student's first choice deanery or area against national criteria. Once the scores are finalised then computer matching using student preferences and the scores is utilised.

It also pointed out that more than 5000 candidates (89%) were matched to posts in the first round of applications – something that has never been achieved so early in the year before. Also, a third of applicants got their first preference, and 85% one of their top 10 choices.

Professor Winyard added, "A radical review of the system has already begun so that all the lessons from this year can be used to improve the process. We will continue to work closely on that with all stakeholders including the Council of the Heads of Medical Schools, the Department of Health, the BMA, and employer organisations." (See p 675.)