Doctors blame untested policies for financial crisis in the NHS

Zosia Kmietowicz *Belfast*

Doctors at the BMA's annual meeting of representatives in Belfast have blamed the government for the financial crisis in the NHS, saying that it has taken a record amount of money away from the care of patients and "squandered" it on unproved reforms.

"This financial crisis has nothing to do with diversionary talk of increases in doctors' pay or profligate spending by NHS trusts. It's a result of [the] government's own making—with relentless ideological reforms that have misappropriated billions away from patient care," said a Middlesex GP and a member of the General Practitioners Committee of the BMA, Chaand Nagpaul.

"[It is] lamentable that this once in a lifetime investment opportunity is being squandered

in front of our eyes, leaving the NHS with cuts in services and staff and unable to afford cancer treatments available in other countries," he added.

Dr Nagpaul was speaking at an open debate on values and funding in the NHS. He said that an estimated £1.5bn (£2.2bn; \$2.7bn) had been spent on "perpetual reorganisation" within the NHS, £1bn had been paid to private management consultants, such as those called in to help debt ridden NHS trusts, and £14bn had been over-spent on the NHS information technology programme.

"The government cannot act with impunity. It must be held to account for its ideological, non-evidence based policies being the single greatest cause in bringing the NHS into financial

James Johnson, the BMA's chairman, addresses the annual representative meeting in Belfast last week

standstill," Dr Nagpaul said.

Jacky Davis, a consultant radiologist at the Whittington Hospital NHS Trust in north London, told the conference that last year the government had spent £33bn on centrally funded initiatives "that do not

impact on patient care," such as the Modernisation Agency and NHS University.

Meanwhile, other representatives attacked the private finance initiative for new hospitals and the introduction of practice based commissioning. PH

Conference attacks referral centres

Zosia Kmietowicz *Belfast*

Doctors have criticised referral management centres for sending patients for inappropriate treatment to independent sector treatment centres far from their home. At their annual conference in Belfast, BMA representatives backed motions that condemned the use of referral management centres, saying they made a nonsense of patient choice, and called for a restoration of GPs' right to refer patients to a named specialist.

Charlie Daniels, a GP in Torquay, said that patients who are referred for whatever reason are in a vulnerable position, because they are worried about what will happen to them. Yet patients in his area are being put under pressure by a referral management centre to switch from being seen at the local district general hospital recommended by their GP to a treatment centre 60 km away in Plymouth.

He recounted the case of a

late middle aged woman whom he referred for an arthroscopy at the local hospital. She returned to the surgery seeking advice after the local referral management centre told her that she was scheduled to have a total knee replacement operation in Plymouth. "In that case my GP colleague re-referred the patient back to the district general hospital [for the minor procedure]," said Dr Daniels. "She [the patient] was clearly distressed, and it would have been negligent for a woman of her age to have a knee replacement."

The independent treatment centre in Plymouth, to which the woman was being referred, is one of an estimated 30 to 40 such independent centres in England.

Independent treatment centres are working well below their capacity, said the BMA's chairman, James Johnson, but they are paid for the number of operations they have been commissioned to perform whether they do them or not.

"At the same time the NHS has very severe problems—laying off staff in large numbers because they cannot afford to keep them. We can understand why doctors are getting angry," he said. PH

BMA leaders accused of weak opposition to the government

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

The BMA leadership was accused at its annual meeting this week of having failed patients, doctors, and the country by not actively opposing the current wave of organisational and financial reforms of the health service.

The representatives voted by 58% to 42% in support of a motion saying that the current policy of exposing defects in policy was not powerful enough and insisted that it be replaced by a policy of active opposition and proper scrutiny.

Fay Wilson, a GP and a member of the BMA council, said that doctors were frustrated and disappointed at the ineffectiveness of the BMA policy. "It is all very well having private meetings with the government and hoping they will see the light, but we need a higher profile. We need action as well as words."

Dr Wilson said she would like to see the BMA put as much effort into defending the NHS as it had into fighting tobacco use and getting smoking banned in public enclosed spaces.

"If we had drawn a line in the sand a few years ago we might not be having to put up a breakwater now."

Hamish Brown, a consultant surgeon and a member of the BMA's consultants' committee, said: "The unchallenging nature of the BMA response [to the government's policy] has painted us as supporting the reforms."

Mr Brown said members had been telling the BMA leadership for years what the consequence of the reforms was going to be. "These reforms will be bad for patients, bad for taxpayers, and bad for doctors."

James Johnson, chairman of the BMA's council, replied that the BMA had no choice but to talk to the government. "We have spent the best part of the last two years telling the government in great detail what is wrong with their policies."

The BMA would be putting its views to the government at next week's summit meeting with the health secretary, Patricia Hewitt. PH