



16<sup>th</sup> January 2014

Dear Colleague

Occupational health services were introduced by the government for general practices under PCTs in recognition of the high levels of stress and ill health in the profession. They were also brought in to meet the unique needs and circumstances of GPs, who may at times have difficulties or anxieties about in seeing another local GP colleague. In addition, the service provided necessary support to practice staff to maximise their return to work and capability with regard to health issues. Indeed, NHS Employers continues to recognise the need for access to competent and confidential occupational health services for all NHS staff. And the government's own publication, *Healthy Staff, Better Care for Patients*, published in 2011, highlighted the importance of the NHS being an exemplary employer in terms of occupational health services for its staff.

It is therefore of great concern that NHS England proposes discontinuing dedicated occupational health services for GP practices, with many services previously in existence under PCTs already having ceased due to lack of continued funding. NHS England states that it will ensure GPs registering on the National Performers List are well enough to carry out their responsibilities as contractors. It further proposes that GPs on the performer lists suffering with stress or burnout, or a health problem that may impact on their ability to provide services would have a professional responsibility to flag this up, either through their appraiser or directly with the area team Medical Director's office, in order to access support. However, this is wholly inadequate and not a truly comprehensive occupational health service, and will inevitably deter or delay some GPs from seeking health advice or treatment, in particular if this is in relation to a sensitive matter. NHS England's proposals will remove occupational health services altogether for practice staff, a move which fails to recognise that GP practices work as a team. This will leave our staff adrift — a situation I experienced first-hand recently when we were unable to find support for a member of staff in my own practice in London.

These proposals are short-sighted, will be counterproductive and are a retrograde step going against the very ethos of a healthy NHS workforce, and contradict the purpose of the government introducing these services for GP practices in the first place. They risk greater levels of sickness and absence from stress and ill health, and will adversely impact on our ability to deliver patient care, and will also undermine GP retention and productivity in the workforce.

I have therefore jointly written a letter with Paul Nicholson, Chair of the BMA's Occupational Medicine Committee, to Charlie Massey, who is Director General, Strategy and External Relations at the Department of Health. The letter urges NHS England to reconsider its proposals, and for it to provide a fully funded, universal, fit-for-purpose occupational health service for all GPs and our staff.

### **Contract negotiations in devolved nations**

You may be aware that contract negotiation for changes in 2014/15 successfully concluded in Scotland last month and in Wales last week. See [bma.org.uk/gpc](http://bma.org.uk/gpc) for the latest information.

GPs living in these nations will have received a separate email update with details, but if not, I am pleased to say that, as in England, it was agreed to reduce unnecessary QOF targets and bureaucracy and to focus resources on the most vulnerable patients in the community. Although these contracts were negotiated separately in each country, they all share common themes and reaffirm the interdependence of the devolved nations with changes negotiated in one country having an influence on neighbouring nations - this is why GPC remains a UK body. I would like to pay tribute to the hard work of the respective Chairs of GPC Scotland and Wales, Alan McDevitt and Charlotte Jones, and also to their negotiating teams. We are awaiting news on the contract in Northern Ireland.

As usual if you have any queries about our work or need support, contact us at [info.gpc@bma.org.uk](mailto:info.gpc@bma.org.uk).

With best wishes,

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