Consultant numbers have doubled over the past 20 years

Over the past two decades, the number of consultants working in the NHS has more than doubled, rising from 22,920 in 1996 to 54,539 in 2016.

The growth during this period was faster than in the four decades beforehand. Between 1955 and 1975, the number rose from 5,210 to 14,030. Between 1975 and 1995, the number increased by a further 56% from 14,030 to 21,920, before rising to 54,539 in 2016. The consultant workforce has also grown more quickly than both the GP workforce and the NHS workforce as a whole.

Looking at comparative figures for England, the number of full time equivalent (FTE) consultants working in the NHS has more than doubled over the past two decades, from 18,603 in 1996 to 44,333 in 2016. By contrast, the number of FTE GPs in England only rose by 25% over this period, from 27,550 in 1996 to 34,423 in 2016.

Over this period, the total number of FTE staff working across the NHS rose by 37%, from 848,104 in 1996 to 1,162,720 in 2016. This means that consultants make up a greater proportion of NHS staff than they did in the past. In 1995, when there were 17,900 FTE consultants in England and 825,410 other staff working across the NHS as a whole, consultants made up 2.1% of the NHS workforce. By 2016, this proportion had almost doubled; there were 44,333 FTE consultants and 1,116,720 other staff working across the NHS, meaning that consultants made up 3.8% of the workforce.

Tom Moberly, UK editor, The BMJ
tmoberly@bmj.com
Judith Mackay

The art of war on tobacco

What was your earliest ambition?
To tie my shoelaces—by myself.

What was your best career move?
From curative to preventive medicine in 1984, albeit with a huge loss of income.

What was the worst mistake in your career?
I naively thought in 1984 that it might be possible to work on tobacco control in cooperation with the tobacco industry. That hope lasted barely a week.

How is your work-life balance?
Slanted too much towards work. I’d like to reduce my workload by a quarter.

How do you keep fit and healthy?
It goes without saying that I’m a non-smoker. I get as close as I can to 8888 steps a day, play golf, and practise tai chi. Also, I have removed sugar from my diet.

What single change would you like to see made to the NHS?
Having lived in Hong Kong since 1969, I can’t answer this. But, having seen other health systems at work around the world, preservation of the NHS is paramount.

Do doctors get paid enough?
Doctors working in preventive/public health most certainly do not, globally.

To whom would you most like to apologise?
I think I’m due an apology—we all are. From the tobacco industry and its allies.

What do you usually wear to work?
I work from a home office, so I’d better not be too specific! But at conferences and meeting ministers I wear a smart Chinese brocade silk jacket and black trousers.

Which living doctor do you most admire, and why?
Sir Richard Peto, who has kept us right on the numbers and whom I’ve worked with in China for decades.

What single change has made the most difference in your field?
The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, WHO’s only international health treaty. At a stroke, it united and committed governments and prevented the tobacco industry from isolating and influencing those governments one by one.

What new technology or development are you most looking forward to?
When conference calls are as good as face-to-face meetings.

What book should every doctor read?
The Art of War by Sun Tzu. Sun served as a military strategist during the Warring States period, around 500 BC. His book is relevant today in tackling the non-communicable disease epidemic and, I suspect, far more besides.

Where are or when were you happiest?
Now—with my husband and family, friends, colleagues, and job.

Summarise your personality in three words
Optimistic, undeterred, fun loving.

Is the thought of retirement a dream or a nightmare?
It’s not relevant. I’ll be working when I’m 100 years old.

If you weren’t in your present position what would you be doing instead?
Looking for a similar job in tobacco control.

Cite this as: BMJ 2017;359:j4950