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The BMJ Press Release

Should all GPs become NHS employees?

In **The BMJ** today, experts debate whether all GPs should become NHS employees.

Azeem Majeed, professor of primary care at Imperial College London, argues that "our current model of primary care is failing," and there will be "a gradual implosion of general practice in many parts of England."

"Many of the problems faced by GPs are partly due to the contracts that general practices have which encourage the NHS to transfer work to primary care," he warns, because GPs are not given enough time or resources to take on this extra work.

Recruitment of GPs is difficult, many are considering retiring early, and others want to cut down on clinical work. There are also reports of high levels of dissatisfaction, such as short consultation lengths and high number of consultations in the day.

Instead, if GPs had employment contracts similar to NHS consultants, they could have job plans, with time allocated for clinical work and administration, teaching, training and research, he explains. In addition, better career structures could be developed for GPs, for example, to create specialists posts.

Furthermore, GPs would lose many of the responsibilities that make their work stressful, and no longer be liable to meet requirements of the Care Quality Commission, and their hours of work would be protected by the European Working Time Directive.

"The NHS, as the employer, would be responsible for ensuring that there were enough GP to meet demand for primary care, and to address people's clinical needs," he concludes.

On the other hand, Laurence Buckman, a GP partner in London, disagrees because independent contractor status provides autonomy and distance from a non-benign employer.

He says the recent hospital junior doctors' dispute provides "a graphic demonstration of why GPs are much better off in a semi-autonomous business, working for their own patients, in their work practices."

"GP partners have the freedom to run their practices as they wish—as long as they deliver a safe and effective service," he explains.

"If GPs became NHS employees, they may well have to work to tougher performance indicators with less cover, as we have seen with hospital and district nursing colleagues," he warns.

Furthermore, he says "GPs would have less incentive to control costs such a move could cost the NHS rather than save money."

"The greatest benefit for independent contractors is the ability to make agreements with patients without the need for anyone else's approval," he argues. "If an independent GP and a patient agree on a course of action the response can be immediate, at least for the 84% of contacts resolved by GPs without recourse to other parts of the NHS."

In an accompanying commentary, Des Spencer, a GP in Glasgow, agrees that "general practice is in crisis", but he argues "there is a third way that delivers the benefits of salaried service while preserving the elements of local clinical control."

He outlines a model based on his experience of building a practice from 5,000 to 35,000 patients in the past two decades.

This scaling up initiative requires practices to become much larger, with groups of 20 or more doctors, that can become training hubs with multiple registrars, but with fewer partners, and many more flexible employed salaried options.

"Pay should be capped for partners and salaried positions paid agreed national rates. All staff should have a stake in the partnership, including nurses and reception staff," he explains.

In addition, the practices should be run as local not-for-profit social enterprises that reinvest profits in developing services.

He says they find it "easy to recruit staff, have provided private physiotherapy and podiatry services through the practice, open 7 till 7 and Saturdays, and generally have a happy workforce."

"There is an increasing trend for larger practices, and this needs to be accelerated, facilitated, and prioritised through a new contract with a new vision of general practice," he concludes.

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Note to Editors

Head to Head: Should all GPs become NHS employees?

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