

UK junior doctors vote to ballot on industrial action

Linda Beecham, *BMJ*

The BMA will ballot its 30 000 junior doctor members over industrial action unless the UK government agrees to negotiate on out of hours pay. After a heated debate at last week's junior doctors' conference, delegates voted unanimously for a ballot before the end of September.

The decision was boosted by a survey of all junior BMA members in which four out of five of the respondents—there was a 37% response rate—said that they would be willing to take some action in support of an antisocial hours supplement for working weekends and bank holidays.

Junior doctors in the United Kingdom have long campaigned for improvements in out of hours pay. Most are paid at 50% of the standard hourly rate after the first 40 hours of work, and this rate applies to nights, weekends, and bank holidays. Their anger has been exacerbated by the government's decision that NHS employees will be expected to work for normal bank holiday pay over the millennium holiday period (22 May, p 1425). This means £4.02 (\$6.40) an hour for most first year junior doctors. They are also angry

that the European Union's council of ministers has decided to delay the implementation of the 48 hour working time directive for junior hospital doctors for 13 years (5 June, p 1508).

A detailed survey of over 2000 doctors showed that 95% of junior doctors were prepared to take some form of industrial action over compulsory overtime, antisocial hours supplements, and pay for the millennium holiday period. Of those prepared to take action, 79% said that they would work to rule, 57% said that they would refuse to do clerical tasks, 45% would cover emergencies only, and 21% would support a total withdrawal of labour.

Under trades union legislation, only members of the BMA would be able to take industrial action. "This is not just about pay," said Nizam Mamode, chairman of the junior doctors' negotiating subcommittee, "it is about safety for us and for the public. It is about the appalling conditions in which we work." The committee has been trying to negotiate a new contract with the Department of Health for two years, without success. "Does the government care? Does it care about



UK junior doctors have voted for further action on pay

the stress we face caring for sick people?" he asked.

Kate Adams, a house officer in London, told the meeting that she had worked for 31 hours out of a 34 hour shift over the last bank holiday for only £4.02 an hour. She had two messages for the government: "Do not force me to work when I am physically and mentally exhausted; and pay me fairly for the job that I do."

The chairman of the Junior Doctors Committee, Mr Andrew Hobart, warned: "The morale of junior doctors is in a critical

state. These results clearly demonstrate that junior doctors are no longer prepared to put up with derisory rates of pay for often staggeringly long hours of work. The government has done nothing to convince us that it is working to protect the welfare of junior doctors and the safety of patients. We hope that it will now sit up and listen." After the conference, the UK health secretary, Frank Dobson, commented: "We are willing to consider with junior doctors changes to the structure of junior doctors' pay, if that is what they want." □

Increasing numbers of English junior doctors work above agreed limits on hours

The number of junior doctors in England working more than the nationally agreed hours has risen by 78% since last year, according to figures published this week.

Latest official figures, based on returns for 31 March 1999, show that 8506 (29%) junior doctors are working beyond the limits in the 1991 new deal on hours of work, which said that junior doctors should work no more than 56 hours a week (or 72 hours on call with adequate rest periods). This compares with non-compliance among 4793 (16%) at the end of September 1998. Forty three per cent of preregistration house officers were working beyond the new deal limits compared with 22% in 1998. In December 1998 the NHS Executive instructed NHS trusts to monitor hours of actual work and rest periods while on call. National standards for this were agreed with the BMA's Junior Doctors Committee.

Commenting on the new figures, Andrew Hobart, chairman of the committee, said: "These latest figures are scandalous. Is it any wonder that doctors have had enough? This is further evidence that junior doctors continue to work far too many hours than it is safe to do, and the situation is getting worse. The United Kingdom has fewer doctors per head of population than almost any other civilised country... It is not unusual for junior doctors to work 24 hours without proper breaks. Some are on duty continuously for over 80 hours... It not only is detrimental to the health and wellbeing of the doctor but puts patient care at risk."