

For other stories from this year's meeting, go to bmj.com/content/vol329/issue7456/#NEWS_ROUNDUP

Doctors' careers are blighted by discrimination, says BMA

Zosia Kmietowicz *Llandudno*

The BMA has called for a strategy of "zero tolerance" towards discrimination against doctors in the NHS, after research has found that doctors' careers are being blocked on grounds of disability, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

For its report the BMA interviewed 25 self selected doctors who had experienced discrimination. The doctors were asked about what had happened to them, how their experiences had made them feel, and how they thought things should change.

Their experiences showed that discrimination was widespread throughout the NHS and that not enough was being done to tackle it, the report says.

One woman commented: "I have encountered extreme obstacles in my career progression to the point where I frankly didn't really want to speak to you. My memories are very painful and very unpleasant; however, I suppose, for the good of the cause I felt an obligation to do so."

Another doctor, with a disability, said: "Once, the consultant who spoke to me told me that I should not be applying for clinical jobs at all and advised me to change career."

A common complaint among doctors from ethnic minorities was that despite being told by the General Medical Council that their degree was recognised they didn't pass the Professional Linguistics Assessment Board (PLAB) test. Many doctors have criticised this test, which assesses English language and clinical skills, for being too difficult and one that many British doctors would fail.

And if they do secure a post in the NHS many ethnic minority doctors find they do not progress in their careers in the same way other doctors do.

One interviewee commented: "Lots of ethnic minority doctors get stuck at LAT [locum appointment for training], LAS [locum appointment for service], trust grade, staff grade, associate specialist, and locum consultants. Their career progression has been blocked because of their ethnic background."

Dr Vivienne Nathanson, head of science and ethics at the BMA, said: "The stories are sad. These are people who feel their careers have been blighted, and we want



WILL & DENNI MONTYRESPL

Many doctors from ethnic minorities find their career path blocked

to make sure that does not happen any more."

The BMA plans to work with the Department of Health to develop a zero tolerance strategy across the NHS. It also recommends that medical schools include diversity and equality awareness in their undergraduate curriculums.

Dr George Rae, chairman of the BMA equal opportunities committee, said: "It is not acceptable for anyone to think this is someone else's problem. It is everyone's problem. We are all responsible for creating the current environment, and it is only through our collective and individual actions that we can start to move forward. Attitudes must change first—and by launching this report the BMA hopes to spearhead this change."

A spokesperson from the health department commented: "The government is fully committed to diversity and equality of opportunity for all health services staff. There is no place for discrimination or harassment in the NHS on grounds of race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or age. The NHS workforce must reflect the population it serves."

"Earlier this month Nigel Crisp [the NHS chief executive] launched a consultation paper, *Equality and Diversity in the Medical Workforce*, which looks at ways of working with bodies such as the BMA to overcome some of the barriers to equality."

Career Barriers in Medicine: Doctors' Experiences is accessible at www.bma.org.uk

More patients could be treated in the UK if associate specialists' skills were recognised

Zosia Kmietowicz *Llandudno*

Thousands of patients who are being sent abroad for surgery could be treated in their local hospital if the skills of staff and associate specialist doctors working throughout the NHS were properly recognised, the BMA's annual conference heard.

Mr Mohib Khan, chairman of the Staff and Associate Specialists Committee, said that the doctors he represents have been treated as an underclass, often bullied and harassed by colleagues and frustrated and demoralised by their lack of progression and recognition.

Despite years of experience the careers of many of the 12 500 specialist doctors in the United

Kingdom are being blocked. These doctors are prevented from applying for consultant posts because their experience does not count towards inclusion on the specialist register, even though legislation to allow them to do so was passed last year.

"Patients are losing out because highly skilled specialists are being prevented from offering their full expertise," Mr Khan told delegates.

In a video broadcast at the conference Miss Pushpa Dudani, a breast surgeon in Rotherham, recounted how patients questioned her right to treat them when they saw the words "associate specialist" on her badge

despite the fact that she had 15 years' experience in the specialty.

"As an associate specialist, I can do the same things consultants do, but I'm not allowed to become one because the royal colleges don't recognise all my years of experience. They have tunnel vision, and unless they change their attitude, we're not going to move forward at all," she said.

Another doctor, Mr Vijay Kumar, who now works in Yorkshire, held a senior post in a teaching hospital in Saudi Arabia and had trained many doctors who now practised as consultants in the NHS. However, his experience is not recognised by the Royal College of Surgeons, which prevents him from qualifying as a consultant and limits the amount of responsibility he can take.

"It's frustrating that so many patients waiting for operations are being sent overseas or to independent sector treatment centres staffed by surgeons from

countries like South Africa. I fail to understand why they can't be treated by someone like me," said Mr Kumar.

Associate specialists also lose out financially. At the top of their grade, associate specialists can earn around £60 000 (\$110 000; €90 000) whereas their consultant colleagues doing the same work can expect to earn more than £101 500.

Mr Khan complained about delays in negotiating a new contract for staff and associate specialist doctors, which was due to start in April this year.

"The pay differential is ever increasing between SAS [staff and associate specialist] doctors and their medical colleagues in the NHS, and we are tired of waiting," he said.

Delegates voted unanimously for the BMA to tackle the delayed new contract as a matter of urgency to secure better conditions and pay for these grades. □