

## FEATURE



## MEDICINE AND THE MEDIA

## Junior doctors: it's not about the money

Junior doctors are angry at proposed changes to their contract. Though much of the media coverage has been sympathetic, there has not been universal support for their cause, **Abi Rimmer** reports

Abi Rimmer *reporter, BMJ Careers*

Last Saturday around 15 000 junior doctors, along with colleagues, friends, and family, took to the streets of London, Nottingham, and Belfast to protest against changes to their contract. According to the BMA, the government's proposals for a new contract will reduce juniors' pay and remove safeguards that protect them from working excessive hours, jeopardising patient care as a result.

For the most part, the media coverage of the junior doctors' concerns has been positive. The *Daily Mail* even ran an article about an anti-contract song. Medical student Eirion Slade's cover of Jessie J's song Price Tag, with the chorus, "It's not about the money, money, money," has become a huge hit online, the paper reports.<sup>1</sup>

And coverage was not confined to national newspapers. Jessica Butler, a junior doctor working in acute and internal medicine, told the mass circulation *Grazia* magazine, "I work so hard for what's not a lot of money compared to my friends, and now the government is telling me I'm not even worth that? It's so demoralising."

However, despite the high turnout at Saturday's protest, coverage was minimal in the Sunday papers, with most dedicating just enough space for a photograph and a couple of paragraphs.

The *Independent* was the only paper to splash the rally on its front page; ironic, since the paper's coverage of the evolving story has been far from positive. Earlier this month Mary Dejevsky's column, "When junior doctors say it's not about the money, they're lying" challenged the BMA's concern that the new contract would disproportionately affect junior doctors working less than full time and taking parental leave.<sup>2</sup> "Female doctors complain that the new system will make it harder for them to work part-time and combine a career with motherhood—as though this is not a serious problem for almost every professional woman," wrote Dejevsky.

Dejevsky said the BMA was using arguments against the new contract that it had also used "in its efforts to block the introduction of a seven-day NHS: compromised patient safety, longer working hours, demoralisation, and the risk that every half-competent doctor will hightail it abroad (not, note, for

voluntary service in the backwoods, but for the good life in Australia or Canada). But the money? Good heavens, it's not about the money. No, really."

The *Times* also hit back with an opinion piece by Ross Clark titled, "You can't believe BMA propaganda about doctors' pay."<sup>3</sup> Clark wrote, "Doctors who take career breaks won't suffer 'a huge pay cut,' as one woman claims in a video on the BMA website. It just means that in future doctors will have to progress to the next stage of training before getting a pay rise rather than automatically getting one every year."

The sticky issue of pay also came up on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme last Saturday (17 October, [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p035gt2k](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p035gt2k)) in a debate between the health secretary, Jeremy Hunt, and specialist registrar Dagan Lonsdale.

Lonsdale said he received £53 000 for working an average of 48 hours a week. However, he argued that if his pay was cut and working hours were increased under the new contract, he and his wife could not afford to remain as doctors. It was an argument questioned by presenter John Humphries.

"With the best will in the world you can't run the health service on the basis that two married doctors who have a small child need x, y, and z working hours," Humphries said. "You can't do it like that; you have to have a structure, which is what [the government] wants to introduce."

Meanwhile, Hunt seemed to gain some traction with the presenter, as he insisted that he had no intention of cutting juniors' pay or increasing their working hours.

"We want to reduce the maximum hours a doctor can work from 91 hours to 72 hours. We want to ban hospitals from making doctors work five nights in a row, ban them from working six long days in a row. We know that in the end if doctors are tired the chances of making mistakes are higher," Hunt said.

However, he did concede that the new contract would remove the financial penalties placed on trusts that overworked junior doctors, something which Lonsdale argued would ring in the 100 hour weeks of the bad old days. "We want to remove the financial penalties that force hospitals to roster less at weekends, yes," Hunt said.

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

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- 1 Pickles K. It's NOT about the money, money, money: junior doctor's protest song over controversial changes to NHS contracts sweeps the internet. *Daily Mail* 2015 Oct 6. [www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-3261795/It-s-NOT-money-money-money-Junior-doctor-s-protest-song-controversial-changes-NHS-contracts-sweeps-internet.html#ixzz3p1XDzG00](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-3261795/It-s-NOT-money-money-money-Junior-doctor-s-protest-song-controversial-changes-NHS-contracts-sweeps-internet.html#ixzz3p1XDzG00).

- 2 Dejevsky M. When junior doctors say it's not about the money, they're lying. *Independent* 2015 Oct 9. [www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-complaints-of-junior-doctors-are-self-serving-its-really-all-about-the-money-a6686831.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-complaints-of-junior-doctors-are-self-serving-its-really-all-about-the-money-a6686831.html).
- 3 Clark R. You can't believe BMA propaganda about doctors' pay. *Times* 2015 Oct 8. [www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/thunderer/article4579292.ece](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/thunderer/article4579292.ece).

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