ACUTE PERSPECTIVE

VIEWS & REVIEWS

David Oliver: Jeremy Hunt was wrong to blame the “irresponsible BMA” for his own mistakes

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On Sunday, Jeremy Hunt gave an unconvincing appearance on the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show*. With a further strike by junior doctors planned for Wednesday 10 February, the host doggedly questioned the health secretary.

Marr challenged Hunt's repeated claims that excess deaths associated with weekend admission were preventable and that medical understaffing was the clear cause. Even when confronted with a critique of his simplistic stance by NHS England's medical director, Bruce Keogh, or by *The BMJ*'s editor, Fiona Godlee, Hunt wouldn't budge, saying, “She's wrong.” He then backtracked to say that the “weekend effect” was actually down to senior doctors. “So why pick a fight with junior doctors?” Marr asked.

Increasingly discomfited by emails read out from junior doctors about the pressures of their working lives, Hunt turned his fire to accuse the BMA of being “irresponsible” and “misleading its members,” deflecting blame from his own handling of the situation.

What an extraordinary assertion. Only two thirds of junior doctors are BMA members (though more have joined since Hunt made himself the focus of an industrial dispute). Few junior doctors I know were especially engaged with health policy or politics before all of this, let alone were BMA activists. The stand-off, and wider concerns over the future of the NHS and their careers, has changed that. Hunt has been an accidental recruiter and radicaliser.

Several grass roots movements—such as @meetthedoctors, #iminworkjeremy, or @nhssurvival—have no links with the

BMA. Many of the junior doctors who became unwitting stars of the campaigns had never held BMA roles.

It was Hunt who gratuitously attacked doctors' “9 to 5 culture” and a “lost sense of vocation.” It was he who had to be dragged to the arbitration service Acas, long after the BMA's offer. It was he who inappropriately used junior doctors' personal educational portfolios to write directly to them in an attempt to bypass the union. And it is he who has repeatedly overstated evidence around weekend mortality despite being repeatedly corrected by experts.

Junior doctors are a highly educated, intelligent, and determined workforce and are an intellectual match for party spin machines, though perhaps without the same low cunning. The notion that they are a bunch of saps, readily misled by the Pied Piper of the BMA, beggars belief. That they would more readily trust a multimillionaire politician with no healthcare experience and an ideological agenda, over their own trade union, is surreal in its naivety.

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