Speaking truth to power

Fiona Godlee editor in chief

Each year we award The BMJ editors’ prize for “persistence and courage in speaking truth to power.” The list of previous winners reads like a roll of honour: Peter Wilmshurst, Clare Gerada, Martin McKee, Susan Bewley, Trish Greenhalgh, Robin Stott, Jenny Vaughan, and David Nicholl. These are people who have bravely called out wrongdoing or have paved a compelling path for doing right, often through their writings in The BMJ. At the end of last year the prize went to Allyn Pollock, who is interviewed this week.1

Why should we prize these people so highly? Because it takes determination, diligence, and skill to speak out effectively, to use data and judgment, to avoid the easy resort to polemic or personal attack, and to balance necessary criticism with constructive ideas. Because it means saying unpopular things that people in power don’t want to hear.

We know that these few prize winners represent many others, working across healthcare around the world, who have shown immense courage, sometimes quietly, sometimes alienating themselves from colleagues, sometimes risking their careers and even their lives.

Supporting them and the issues they champion is part of The BMJ’s role, and in this week’s print journal we have published articles that reflect just some of the many issues that need attention. With services at full stretch because of the surge in covid-19 cases, health professionals are speaking out.2 The vaccine rollout is faltering and patchy,3 because junior doctors spoke out, the UK regulator has responded to concerns about women who are breastfeeding being advised against having the vaccine4-6 and indeed the data from all the vaccine trials.7 On a positive note, because junior doctors spoke out, the UK regulator has responded to concerns about women who are breastfeeding being advised against having the vaccine4-6 and because patients spoke out, there is progress—however slow—towards a register of doctors’ financial interests.7

Not everyone can or will want to speak out. For those of you looking to make a difference in other ways, there is our charity appeal.8 We have passed previous records in the amount already donated. Families in need will thank you for your generosity.

1 Mahase E. “In the 1980s NHS there wasn’t today’s climate of fear around speaking out”—Allyson Pollock. BMJ 2021;372:m4930d oi: 10.1136/bmj.m4930.
7 Schwartz JL. Equitable global access to coronavirus disease 2019 vaccines. BMJ 2020;371:m375. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m375 pmid: 33323384
11 Mahase E. Covid-19: Order to reschedule and delay second vaccine dose is “totally unfair,” says BMA. BMJ 2020;371:m4978. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4978 pmid: 33384299
16 Hare H, Womersley K. Why were breastfeeding women in the UK denied the covid-19 vaccine? BMJ 2021;372:n4. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n4.
18 Feinn J. Community support that’s more than a sticking plaster. BMJ 2021;372:n4959. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n4959.