

BMA response to the Health Secretary's letter to all GPs

Commenting on the letter the Health Secretary, Alan Johnson, has today (Monday 4 February 2008) sent to all GPs regarding the government's offer for contract changes in 2008, and the subsequent threat to GPs if they do not accept the offer, Dr Laurence Buckman, Chairman of the BMA's GPs Committee said:

"GPs are not against working extended hours - the BMA's proposals included this as well as significant improvements in clinical care. Indeed the charities which represent older people have said publicly how disappointed they are that the government chose not to accept this offer saying it "would have constituted one of the most beneficial and cost effective reforms in preventative patient care for older people in recent years."¹ Instead the QOF (Quality and Outcomes Framework) points² we wanted to reinvest to improve clinical care are being used to fund extended opening hours – something the government's own patient survey has shown is wanted by only a minority of patients.³

"The 1.5% increase in investment talked about by Mr Johnson refers to a future, as yet undecided pay award from the body that recommends doctors' pay awards. There have been two years of 0% increases in practice funding and the government's imposition would see practices lose an average of £36,000 in resources. This is money, taken from the QOF, and given to Primary Care Trusts to use to fund extended hours – yet in some areas there is little demand for this.

"Despite what the government claims, their plans and the resulting loss in practice resources will destabilise many well-established GP surgeries and this could have a knock-on effect on daytime services, the time when our highest users - mothers with young children, older patients and those with chronic conditions - need and want to see their GP. GPs want to provide the best possible care they can because what is good for their patient is invariably good for the practice.

"GPs are worried about the future for their practices and their patients. We are being contacted all the time by GPs who are angry and upset about the bullying behaviour of the government and who fear that the government's plans will damage general practice in this country. How else can one interpret the threat to take money away from GPs when we know Primary Care Trusts have been told to spend money on private general practice provision by big companies?

"It is because of that strength of feeling that we decided to conduct an opinion poll of the nation's family doctors. The BMA never rejected the government's offer, but we couldn't accept it on behalf of the profession without making certain that we are representing what they think."

Ends

Notes to editors:

1. Letter to The Times, 14th January 2008, signed by the President of the British Society for Rheumatology, the President of the Royal College of Nursing, the President of the British Orthopaedic Association, the Director General of Help the Aged, the Chief Executive of the British Geriatrics Society, the President of the Royal College of Surgeons of England and the Chief Executive of the National Osteoporosis Society.
2. The Quality and Outcomes Framework was introduced in April 2004 as part of the new national GP contract. It rewards GPs for implementing good practice in their surgeries. There are currently up to 1000 points available, which can make up a total of 40% of practice income. Every year an expert panel, the BMA's GP Committee and NHS Employers negotiators seek to define where points may be moved or recycled and what new clinical work or adjustments should be made to ensure patients continue to receive the best and most up-

to-date evidence-based care.

3. The government's GP Patient Survey showed 84% of patients are happy with current opening hours. Only four in every hundred patients wanted extended opening hours in the evening and seven out of every hundred patients wanted Saturday surgeries. Over two million people were surveyed by the government at a cost to the taxpayer of more than £11 million.

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