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The Rt Hon Victoria Atkins MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
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Monday 15th January 2024

Dear Secretary of State

We are writing from HCSA – the hospital doctors’ union, the professional association and trade union representing hospital doctors at every grade. As you know, we have been engaged in talks with your team on resolving consultant, SAS and junior doctor pay disputes in England. Today, we received results from our ballot of consultant members on the pay and contract reform package that arose from negotiations.

Firstly, we would like to acknowledge the work from all parties that resulted in the offer. Most notably, all parties agreed that faster progression through the consultant spine and a reduction in the time taken to reach the top represents a significant step forward for consultants, which would also help to address the gender pay gap in medicine.

That notwithstanding, HCSA consultants have voted to reject the package due to several significant concerns.

HCSA asked members to give their reasons for rejection to ensure we are led by the views of the consultant body. In particular they took issue with the inclusion of a clause that permits the redirection of Supporting Professional Activities (SPA) time. As you know, the 2003 consultant contract was meant to ringfence SPA time for activities crucial to patient care, such as teaching, training, service development and research. In negotiations, our team repeatedly expressed concerns about any changes around SPAs, but it was apparent that this was a priority for government negotiators. Instead, surrounding text was provided with the intention to limit the use of the clause. This was relayed to members but it has not allayed their concerns, which are founded in their own experiences of the low priority which SPA time is often given and the ongoing erosion of this crucial part of their working week.

The reality in hospitals is that SPA is increasingly reduced and reallocated to direct clinical care. In research carried out by HCSA in 2016, half of consultants had seen their SPA reduced. In eight out of 10 cases, this had been imposed on members without their agreement. The GMC’s National Training Survey 2023 study found less than half of trainers reported always being able to use time allocated to them as trainer specifically for that purpose.

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This short-termist approach helps managers fill rota gaps, yet it prevents doctors from imparting, refreshing and improving skills that should be drawn upon to provide the best medical care. Ultimately, patients suffer. It is in this context that HCSA's consultant body has resisted what is perceived as a further squeeze on precious SPA time.

A significant proportion of members also hold the view that the pay increases brought about through pay spine reform are not high enough: most notably for those in years two, four, five, six and seven who would receive no immediate uplift. It was highlighted that only 3.45 percent of the award came from new investment, in the context of consultant pay erosion of around a third since 2008/9.

A final significant factor in the reject vote was reform of the DDRB pay review body. The view of our membership is that the reforms put forward are a step in the right direction, but do not go far enough. Medics tell us that without independence as the core principle of pay review body reform, doctors will continue to receive politically motivated outcomes that fail to address the real issues of workforce recruitment and retention.

It is clear that if we are to reach an agreement which will be accepted by consultants, we will now need to re-engage in talks to address their concerns. We urge you to relay this outcome to the Prime Minister with the goal of unlocking more investment for medical and dental pay.

It will be crucial for all parties to get back round the negotiating table with open minds and a clean slate.

We look forward to hearing from you with dates for future talks.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Naru Narayanan
HCSA President



Dr Paul Donaldson
HCSA General Secretary