

LMC Conference Report 2006

This is personal reflection of the Conference, which took place in London on June 15th/16th. We had met on the previous evening at our hotel for a Wessex LMCs Secretariat excellent meal and short meeting, but despite this were all in place for Hamish Meldrum's keynote speech in the morning.

Hamish spoke very well, strongly supporting UK General Practice, defending the negotiators' role in the last round of negotiations and setting a very firm line for the future. Yes, we are the best-paid GPs in Europe, and we deserve it: we are the hardest working, with the longest hours and the greatest responsibility. We have nothing to be ashamed of, our large increase in pay has been earned and is deserved. We have no responsibility for the NHS deficits: the reported 'overspend' in primary care reflects our excellent QOF work which will save lives, and the 'overspend' on OOH work which reflects the fact that previously the Government had OOH on the cheap.

He understood the criticism of the latest pay deal, but the negotiators had prevented a much worse result. This was a one-off adjustment for perceived over-delivery, and would not be repeated. Next year we must have at least an inflation increase, and any new work must be paid for. There must be no back-tracking on the pensions issue, this was absolutely not for negotiation. Any means available would be considered in the event of Government tampering with the pensions deal. Other highlights:

- the white paper: populist, few details, but no money
- private sector a threat?: a guarded no – it's in our hands, we need to grow and innovate, enthuse young GPs, no bunker mentality
- universal PBC: 'dream on, Sir Ian!' – unless PCTs get their act together and invest to save
- cutting funds for flexible careers GPs: madness and short-sighted

Conclusion: a call to the Government to work with us: 'Get the GPs on the pitch – we hold the World Cup for General practice, let's keep it!'

This was a rousing speech and was much-appreciated. The rest of Conference consisted of relatively routine motions condemning the Government for the failure to sort out the Global Sum shortfall, for their lack of appreciation of GPs' work, especially on QOF, and for specific failures of the Secretary of State, the CMO and others, though we stepped back from calling for resignations as this was felt to be counter-productive.

This year relatively few of the Wessex Representatives succeeded in speaking, often not through lack of trying – we were simply not called to speak. However John Dracass caught the Chairman's eye and spoke on the waste of NHS resources in the huge and increasing cost of the IT project and NHS reorganisation; he also was selected for the 'Soapbox' session, telling Conference that we needed to re-visit Patient Participation – we need them on our side, we need their views, they can make a real contribution.

Peter Swinyard championed the cause of the Clinical generalist – 'we are the answer, not the problem', multi-skilled generalists who do everything, manage risk, with high workload: hospitals are filled with specialists, but we are the only generalists. Peter also spoke in the debate on QOF asking us to empower the negotiators rather than restrict their brief, (Vernon Needham also spoke asking that all QOF standards need to be 'measurable') and Peter managed a third speech supporting small practices.

Helen McKeown also made several short speeches, supporting GP partners (as against the increasing trend to salaried GPs) – she was not advocating a 2-tier system, but we do still need the full commitment of partners, and against the increasing trend to GPSIs (though this subsection was lost after the platform advised us against a divisive vote). She also spoke in the PBC debate, criticising PCTs for their failure to engage.

Peter Littlejohns was another of our speakers, causing laughter in the debate on 'no-confidence in the secretary of State' when he stated that he had full confidence that she would continue to further her career! He also spoke in the themed debate about professional regulation, criticising the increase in vexatious complaints and the failure of the GMC to identify and screen these out of the disciplinary process.

Then we had a number of visiting speakers, as part of the conference reforms introduced by Julian Neil in his spell as chairman.

Lord Warner, Minister of State, received a critical but relatively polite reception, though he found it hard to cope with the very mild heckling that he received! He stated that the Government had full confidence in Primary care, and spoke in favour of the current themes of improved access, choice, PBC, quality, and the electronic health record. Responding to questions he was less than convincing on the government's response to the premises issue (more money but local responsibility), the problems of foreign graduates, choice versus financial deficits, the cutting of funding for training and flexible careers (again the mantra of local decision-making was the excuse). My conclusion was that there will be no more central funding and that local negotiation is the way forward – which is fine, except where there are huge PCT deficits.

Graham Catto, GMC President, received a critical though thoughtful reception. He reassured us about changes that have been made already and changes which were now taking place, which would reduce the unacceptable delays. More complaints were being referred back to local level. Of the 5000 complaints about GPs each year, only about 1200 were taken further by the GMC, and only one fifth of these resulted in an outcome affecting the GP's registration. Critical questions followed: Peter Littlejohns expressed concern about the effectiveness of screening and about the performance of PCT panels. Apparently the letters sent out when a complaint has not been taken further have been reviewed so as not to imply unproven guilt.

And we had helpful talks from Iona Heath and Susan Taylor on the problems of urban and remote rural practices, which were well-received.

So the themes of conference this year were:

- Support the Negotiators, particularly on Pensions, and on the need for more funding for the Global Sum, but with no loss of MPIG
- Draw a line in the sand, no more claw backs through 'over performance'
- GPs are the Clinical generalists of the NHS and are vital to the service: we deserve our current pay which must not be eroded
- Current Government policy is in a mess, and they need to listen to us and work with us on issues such as the white paper, PBC, OOH, Choice, and Access
- We are still concerned about the work of the GMC and revalidation
- Private Providers are a threat and we must not be disadvantaged in allocation of contracts, but that in most areas we are well-placed to compete if we have a level playing field
- We are concerned about the way local PCTs with deficits are failing to invest in premises and especially in maternity and other locum allowances
- We are concerned about lack of funding for training, flexible careers and F2 doctors
- We need to sort out the way prevalence is rewarded in the QOF, and ensure more funding for any future additions to this
- Major concerns remain over the NHS IT project, especially on the huge costs and the threat to confidentiality
- Finally we rejected a move to meet in Liverpool in 2008.
- I have omitted the theme that ran throughout the 2 days: the World Cup and England's prospects. But this at least kept us amused!

Stephen Linton