

## INVESTIGATION

# DH set to miss its 5,000 GP target by more than half

The health secretary should be very concerned about his pre-election promise, find **Jaimie Kaffash** and **Alex Matthews-King**



Ah, secretary of state. Now about those 5,000 new GPs...

'I can today confirm plans to train and retain an extra 5,000 GPs,' health secretary Jeremy Hunt told cheering delegates at the Conservative party conference in 2014. But the applause is now sounding rather hollow.

A Pulse analysis of workforce data reveals that if current trends continue, just 2,100 new GPs will be delivered by 2020. And that is a best-case scenario; there are looming storm clouds that could knock even this optimistic projection off course. It does not factor in the harm done by the junior doctor contract dispute and any further damage to GP morale. It also assumes that more UK-trained GPs can be attracted from abroad – an unlikely prospect.

Nevertheless, if Pulse's estimate proves accurate, this would be a disaster for the Conservatives' entire pre-election plan for the NHS. General practice needs at least 5,000 new GPs to stand still and there will not be enough GPs to provide seven-day access or lead on the £10bn plan to produce 'new models of care'.

On every front, health education chiefs are floundering. A 10-point plan to increase the numbers of GPs in training and bring back returners is – based on current trends – likely to bring in just a few hundred extra trained GPs. Two years on from his pledge, Mr Hunt has still to introduce any major scheme to address the 1,400 GPs retiring every year, while hundreds are applying to take their much-needed skills abroad.

Whitehall mandarins are frantically trying to gerrymander the figures, rebranding Mr Hunt's pledge as 5,000 'doctors in general practice' (see box, page 18). But even with the extra time that would give, it is difficult to see how the trend could be reversed. A Health Education England (HEE) marketing campaign featuring GPs signing forms to allow patients to go skydiving has dive-bombed. As Dr Stuart Sutton, former chair of the RCGP's Associates in Training committee, put it: 'If the highlight of a GP career is signing skydive forms, I'm off to watch paint dry.'

And many other medical graduates agreed – with Pulse revealing earlier this year a 5% drop in applications for general practice.

But HEE has several irons in the fire for the next 12 months. It is introducing £20,000 'golden hellos' for trainees to work in areas with poor recruitment – such as Blackpool and the Isle of Wight – and is planning a major review of culture within medical schools to ensure prospective new GPs are not being put off.

#### Ongoing dispute

It is also introducing a fast-track scheme for applicants who score highly on the entrance exam to GP specialty training and the facility to defer starting training for up to 12 months.

But the ongoing dispute on the junior doctors' contract could undermine this

#### 2020: an awkward call to Jeremy Hunt



There is a risk whether we'll be able to get that number of people into general practice  
*Lord Prior, health minister*

work, with many bright young people put off medicine altogether by all the adverse publicity about working hours. There are already reports of large increases in the number of junior doctors applying to go abroad to complete specialist training.

On the other side of the scales, Pulse has obtained data from the NHS Business Authority that show the current rate of GP retirement in England is around 1,400 per year. Some may be tempted back part-time, but this still represents a huge loss when the country needs every GP it can get.

Pulse understands the GPC is close to agreeing a 'retainer scheme' that will see practices given more funding if older GPs are persuaded not to leave, and Pulse recently revealed that the Department of Health was training 160 'resilience' coaches to help keep burnt out members of the profession working (see page 21).

But, again, the Government has waited too long to address this problem and its 'reforms' to seniority payments and public sector pensions – in particular the cap on tax relief – are actively encouraging older GPs to consider jacking it all in.

A major BMA survey of 16,000 grassroots GPs last year found that one-third of GPs were thinking of retiring from the profession within five years. Burnout is a major issue, with a Pulse survey last year showing half of GPs were at risk, and despite promising comprehensive occupational health

# Estimated changes in GP numbers by 2020

2,900

## Missing GPs

Pulse estimates that if current trends continue, around 2,850 new GPs will still be required by 2020 to meet the 5,000 new GPs pledge, but this does not take into account any spike in junior doctors leaving the country due to the contract imposition, or older GPs deciding to retire early.

+1,000

## GP returners

HEE has told Pulse that 176 have so far registered for the GP returners' scheme, with numbers remaining around the same for each quarter. If we assume all these will return to practice in England from abroad (a generous assumption) a total of 936 will be added to the GP workforce by 2020.

But this is not enough to counteract the potential increase in GPs applying to go abroad, and not all of them will go through with their plans – indeed, only nine GPs in the returners scheme were in full-time general practice by the end of the third quarter of 2015/16, a success rate of 8%.

Dr Colin Jacoby, now a GP in Bristol, told Pulse he had lost £60k in earnings in the six months it took him to complete the scheme, while another GP says she had been put off returning because she couldn't support her family on the bursary.

She says: 'I've decided I am not going to complete the course. I have colleagues in Sydney who were wondering if it was worth coming back. Obviously they've been put off by my experience.'

Perhaps HEE should follow the lead of NHS Education Scotland managers, who are flying to Australia to tempt GP émigrés to come home (see the big question, page 5).

+11,800

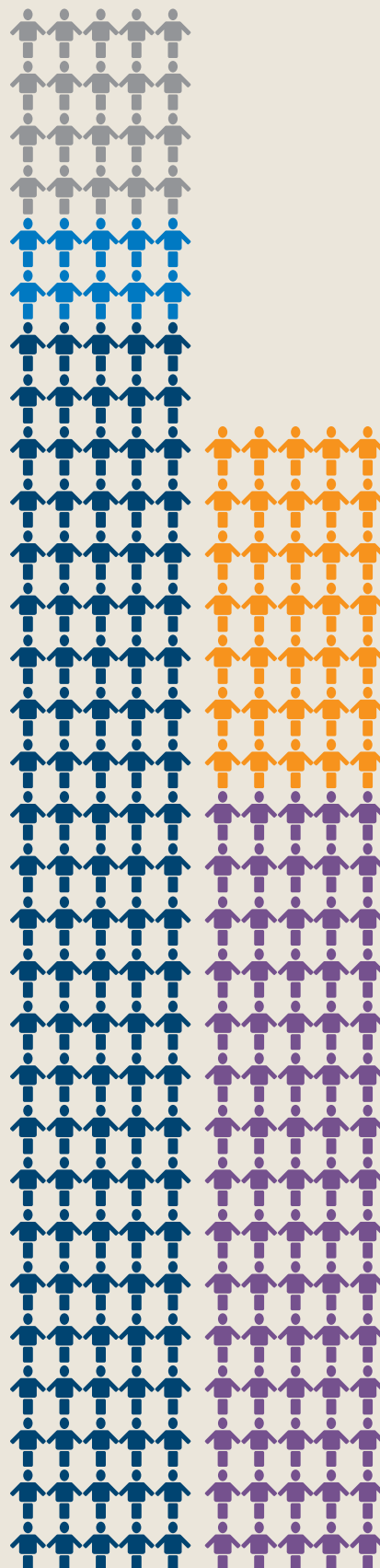
## Newly trained GPs

Health Education England has increased the number of GP training places in recent years, but is struggling to find graduates to fill them. We estimate that – assuming an attrition rate of 2-5% each year and at the end of training – that 11,763 new GPs will be trained by 2020.

There was an increase of 100 filled places last year, but this was due to a disastrous recruitment round the year before. This year, Pulse has revealed a drop in applications for GP training of 5%; that does not bode well, as this is the last year that will produce trained GPs by 2020.

Initial figures on vacancies remaining for the next round of training recruitment suggested that HEE had been successful in filling more training posts this year. However, Pulse revealed that these data contained errors.

This all means HEE has to do much more to attract medical graduates into general practice, and soon. This year, it is introducing £20,000 'golden hellos' and has begun a major review of the culture and attitude to general practice in medical schools – an issue regularly highlighted by Pulse.



-3,500

## Expat GPs

Last year Pulse revealed that around 822 GPs per year were applying for a GMC 'certificate of good standing' that would allow them to leave the country, around 700 of which are based in England.

Not every application leads to emigration – indeed, last year, the GP Survival group told GPs to apply for a certificate as a gesture of protest at the state of the profession, without the intention to use it (these are not included in the 822 figure).

But Pulse's investigation does show there is far more interest among UK GPs in leaving the country than there is in coming back. And since Pulse received the data from the GMC, overseas recruiters have reported an increase in interest. Meanwhile the junior doctor contract imposition also saw a spike in applications for certificates. Shadow health secretary Heidi Alexander said after the imposition that Jeremy Hunt should 'stop behaving like a recruiting agent for Australia'.

Even if applications by GPs stayed at the 2015 level, some 3,500 could be leaving the country in the next five years.

-7,200

## Retirees

Health Education England and the GPC have been working on a GP retainer scheme that Pulse understands is likely to see the light of day in May.

It will need to be good, as official NHS figures, obtained by Pulse under the Freedom of Information Act, reveal that around 1,700 GPs retire every year across the UK (approximately 1,400 in England). Assuming the rate remains the same – another generous assumption – this would see 7,200 GPs retiring by 2020.

But a BMA survey last year found that one-third of GPs were considering retiring within the next five years, suggesting these numbers could worsen.

GPC chair Dr Chaand Nagpaul said at the time that the survey's figures were 'shocking'.

Now, in an attempt to persuade older GPs to stay on by improving their work-life balance, NHS England is planning to train 160 GPs to coach colleagues in resilience (see page 21). It remains to be seen whether this can make any difference.





## How can we get 5,000 new GPs?

### 1 Improve the marketing campaign

An advertising campaign that truly reflects the wonderful variety of a GP career, not short films about skydiving.

### 2 More exposure in medical schools

In medical school I spent just 10 weeks in general practice. This reinforces the view that it's a second-rate option.

### 3 Promote flexible training

Trainees should be offered more than three years of hospital and GP placements, such as being allowed to develop a specialist clinical interest.

### 4 Reduce workload

It's no wonder junior doctors are wary if their only exposure to general practice was a placement where they saw GPs slog through paperwork until 9pm.

### 5 Resource general practice properly

Trainees will not choose a career in which they'll be underfunded and under-appreciated. Fund us properly, so we're not carrying out 90% of patient contacts for 7% of NHS spending.

*Dr Heather Ryan is a GP registrar in Merseyside, medical leadership fellow at Health Education North West and former RCGP associates in training representative. See her full manifesto at [pulsetoday.co.uk/ryan](http://pulsetoday.co.uk/ryan)*

provision for all GPs, NHS England has failed to put any new support in place.

GPC education, training and workforce subcommittee chair Dr Krishna Kasaraneni says: 'The political pledge to recruit 5,000 GPs by 2020 is wholly unrealistic. Pulse's data analysis shows how short we are likely to be. We actually need a lot more GPs than this arbitrarily chosen figure to maintain a basic level of service to patients. With 600 GP trainee posts left unfilled last

year and large sections of the workforce telling the BMA they intend to retire, there is little chance the Government will get anywhere near this target.'

Workforce experts endorse Pulse's recruitment figures, but say there is work going on behind the scenes to ensure the 5,000 target is achieved. Professor Martin Roland – who authored a landmark review into the primary care workforce last month – says a 'whole raft of measures' will be included in the new

'roadmap' package for GPs next month, which will seek to implement his recommendations to broaden the skill mix to include physician associates, pharmacists and paramedics.

Professor Roland says of the Pulse figures: 'The main problem I see is that you don't take account all the efforts that are taking place to improve things – in particular things in the forthcoming "Road Map for General Practice" that NHS England will be publish in the next few weeks – which are designed to increase morale, recruitment and retention and make return to practice easier.

'So yes, if things continue as they are you may be right, but there's a lot of effort going into ensuring that they don't.'

During the last parliament, the DH increased the GP workforce by 1,000 full-time-equivalent GPs and insists it is 'on track' to meet its target of 5,000 more doctors in general practice by 2020. A spokesperson says: 'Pulse's figures don't take the whole picture into account.

'NHS England and HEE are working closely with the BMA and RCGP on a 10-point plan which sets out exactly how we will achieve this. We have been clear that our target includes registrars.'

However, even ministers argue for caution. Lord Prior – the former CQC chair said in the House of Lords last month: 'There is a risk whether we will be able to get that number of people into general practice. However, without that, it will be difficult to deliver our ambitions.'

NEIL O'CONNOR

## How the Government's target has been diluted

The Department of Health now claims its target is to boost the number of doctors 'working in general practice' by 5,000 by 2020. This would allow the DH to include doctors in training in its figures come 2020, giving it three more years to achieve an increase in GP trainee numbers.

But this was not health secretary Jeremy Hunt's original pledge to the Conservative party conference in 2014. His words were: 'Tory conference, I can today confirm plans to train and retain an extra 5,000 GPs.'

And this was the rhetoric leading up to general election, with the DH saying it was committed to bringing '5,000 more GPs' into the system by 2020.

But the rhetoric changed when

Mr Hunt announced his 'new deal' in June 2015. In his speech, he pledged to increase the primary care workforce 'by at least 10,000, including an estimated 5,000 more doctors working in general practice'.

The health secretary also said in the subsequent Q&A session that there would be 'flexibility [in the target] because in some parts of the country it is very hard to recruit GPs'.

In the same week, he backpedalled further, saying 5,000 would be 'the maximum that we would be able to increase the GP workforce by, over the next five years, given the time it takes to train new GPs, given the potential number of people who we can persuade to come back into the profession'.



**Dr Karim Adab:**  
**'Young GPs: we need your help to save our profession'**  
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