

WHY THE SAS CONTRACT IS DELAYED

(A synopsis of an article published in 'Hospital Doctor' on 8 June 2006)

Background

For the past fifteen months, the NHS employers and the BMA have been negotiating a New Contract for Staff Grade and Associate Specialist doctors. We realise that this is taking longer than expected but hope to reach agreement soon.

A key element will be the introduction of a single grade. Doctors on this grade would be paid on a scale with a basic salary that starts above the current Staff Grade minimum and extends to beyond the top of the current basic salary scale for Associate Specialists.

We also hope to remove optional and discretionary points which have not always recognised the contribution of Staff and Associate Specialist doctors and are often seen as unfair and not transparent. Instead we want the value of the points to go into the Associate Specialist basic salary, giving all Associate Specialist doctors an opportunity to reach the top of the pay scale.

Modernising Medical Careers has recommended a single grade structure being introduced. We believe that this new grade, which would replace both the current Staff Grade and Associate Specialist grade, would meet this recommendation. As a result we want to close the current Associate Specialist grade to new entrants, although we want to see the contract improved for existing Associate Specialist doctors who will remain on that grade.

Obviously there are some Staff Grade doctors who would aspire to become Associate Specialists, so we want to provide a window of opportunity to those currently nearing eligibility to be able to apply for re-grading in the normal fashion.

To allow doctors in the single grade to acquire the skills necessary to develop professionally, we want a minimum of one protected program activity a week for activities other than direct clinical care, including Continuing Professional Development, as a contractual requirement on top of the study leave allowance.

We want to see a close contractual similarity between the grade and Consultants. The contract should include a working week based on ten PAs and an annual job plan review. It would be a contractual requirement for SAS doctors to have an appraisal and to have set objectives, which would contribute to a portfolio of evidence that would ease movement between clearly defined thresholds and would provide evidence for applicants for the Specialist Register using the Article 14 route.

(Quotes from Dr Kathy McLean, member of the NHS Employers SAS Negotiating Team)

An agreement on the New Contract for SAS Doctors is within reach but some crucial issues remain unresolved. The BMA and NHS Employers are still negotiating key areas including salary at the top of the new grade, rates of pay for on-call working and changes to the definition of the working week.

The introduction of thresholds within the new grade has led to concerns from some Staff and Associate Specialist doctors that there will be new barriers created to career progression. We are working towards a model where movement across the thresholds is clear and fair. It is vital that we learn from the problems currently faced by doctors working to re-grade from Staff Grade to Associate Specialist.

It would be easy to expect the New Contract to be a miracle cure for all of our problems but, given the context, we must remain realistic about what it can achieve. Rest assured, however, that the BMA will only go to ballot when we believe that we have brokered the best possible deal available.

(Quotes from Mr Awani Choudhary, Chairman of the BMA SAS Negotiating Team).