

GPs out of hours service should be better coordinated

Scotland's GPs called today, Thursday 11 November 2010, for better coordination of out of hours services for patients.

In light of the Scottish Parliament's debate on rural out of hours services, Scotland's GP leaders have called on the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland to do more to establish better quality standards and coordination of services to deliver real improvements for patients. They also underlined that none of this requires a renegotiation of the GP contract.

Dr Andrew Buist, Deputy Chairman of the BMA's Scottish GP Committee said: "There is a perception amongst politicians and the public that the problems with out of hours care stem from the introduction of the GP contract in 2004. This is not the case. In many areas, such as Greater Glasgow, the service that operated prior to 2004 is the same service that continues to operate, albeit the service is now directly managed by the NHS Board.

"The BMA recognises that there is a need to improve some elements of out of hours care. This is a priority for GPs as well as politicians. Involving GPs and other service providers in the planning and co-ordination of services can deliver real improvements for patients. None of this requires a renegotiation of the GP contract." The new contract, which allowed GPs to transfer responsibility for providing out of hours care to the local NHS Board, was designed to combat a crisis in general practice and ensure the sustainability of out-of-hours care for patients. Before the new contract was introduced, morale was at an all time low, GPs were planning to retire early and recruitment was becoming impossible.

Dr Buist added: "Doctors were working excessively long hours,

and rural communities in particular were at risk of losing daytime GP service at the expense of out-of-hours availability. There is no going back to the old 'Dr Finlay' model of general practice. In today's modern service much more complex care is provided to patients in hours and there needs to be a comprehensive out of hours service that does not rely on over-tired GPs bearing the brunt of the work.

"NHS 24 has improved over the last few years, but more needs to be done to educate patients as to who to contact out of hours. Patients continue to receive high quality health care round the clock. However, it is by no means perfect. Improving out of hours care is a priority for GPs as well as politicians.

"Out of hours care encompasses all aspects of the health service: general practice, secondary care and community care, all of which can be accessed by first contacting NHS 24. More should be done to promote NHS 24 to the public as the first point of contact for non emergency calls out of hours."