Junior Doctor contracts – PR winners and losers

BY CAROLINE HOWLEY April 28, 2016 NHS

With the junior doctors’ strike hitting the headlines for many months now, we’ve been taking a look at some of the key players and seeing who’s winning the PR battle:

Junior doctors – When the junior doctor negotiations first started out the overwhelming sentiment of both the media and the general public was of support. As time has gone on and with the first all-out strike in the history of the NHS happening over the last two days, the tide seems to slowly be turning. Statistics released by BBC News just yesterday showed that 57% of the public backed junior doctors in the fight about contracts although we’re starting to see an increased number of headlines calling for them to return to work. It seems as time is progressing, the public and media divide on this issue is only becoming wider.

Jeremy Hunt – A definite PR loser in this situation. Never has a man received so much negative media attention and still managed to keep his job (case in point Andrew Lansley). First he says all the wrong things, then he says nothing, then he comes back and tries to avert an all-out strike by saying ‘the new contract offers junior doctors who work frequently at weekends more Saturday premium pay than nurses, paramedics and the assistants who work in their own operating theatres.’ Oh dear Jeremy – not really championing a united NHS there!

BMA – With the moral upper hand in the debate and the driving force behind demanding changes to the new junior
doctor contract, the BMA on the whole have come out reasonably well in media coverage. As with the junior doctors, more recently sentiment has changed slightly and the question is started to be asked by the media and public alike whether the BMA are concentrating too much on junior doctor contracts and not fighting for more funding within the NHS as a whole in order to effectively fund a 7-day service. A tricky tight-rope to walk and it will be interesting to see how the BMA’s own overall position and communications evolve.

**David Cameron & George Osborne** – Although David Cameron has had his fair share of flack around this issue, the real champion in this PR war has to be George Osbourne. After all he is the holder of the purse strings and when the row about disability allowance hit, it and he were all over the headlines. It is he and David Cameron who signed up to deliver a 7-day NHS ahead of the last election and yet he’s keeping remarkably quiet on the issue.

**Emergency care** – Surprisingly, reports following the first day of the all-out strike showed that hospitals ‘coped well’ and that emergency care was reportedly quieter than had been expected. Amongst other things, this seems to show that the clear communications to the public in advance of the strike to only use emergency services in an emergency worked. Perhaps this is a tactic that should be employed more consistently going forward to ease the ever increasing burden on our NHS?!

**Patients** – PR aside, sadly but inevitably patients have been the biggest loser of all in this ongoing saga. Multiple media reports have expressed the concern from both inside and out of the NHS regarding what the back-log of postponed operation/procedures (due to senior doctors covering emergency services during the strike) will mean going forward. As the ‘customers’ of the NHS, patients really need to see a united showing from the NHS, it’s employees and those politicians directly involved in its policy. Here’s hoping that all parties will come back around the negotiation table soon and agree on a path forward that not only means a fair junior doctor contract, but a fair outcome for patients.