

2nd February 2019

Supporting Early Career GPs at Bedfordshire First 5

Last week, NHS Digital published its latest workforce data. The good news was an encouraging 2.7% increase in the number of doctors (GPs and GP registrars) working in general practice in England reflecting improved recruitment into the GP training programmes. We are particularly lucky that in our region, East of England, 348 young doctors accepted offers into GPST 1 positions in 2018, an improvement on the 330 that accepted similar positions in 2017. This improvement is more significant when we consider that many regions in England continue to struggle to fill training spaces. Across Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, recruitment numbers are worryingly going down. Equally of concern, although the absolute number of qualified GPs increased by 0.8%, the far more important full-time equivalent GP numbers, a measure that takes account of actual hours of work put in, fell by 2% compared to the same time last year. In real terms, this equates to 576 fewer GPs in England this June compared to June 2018.

What do these numbers mean for our local healthcare system? First, although the divergence in the trends of the number of qualified GPs (downwards) and the composite measure of GP and GP registrars (upwards) may reflect improved recruitment, it also points to the biggest risk we face going forward which is retention. How can we support and encourage our GP trainees to get through the training programme? And once qualified, how can we provide a soft landing for their transition into work as independent practitioners in our area? Given the systemic risks that workforce issues pose, this is probably one of the most important challenges we face today. It is even more salient for a second reason: there is virtually a single market for GP workforce not only across the four nations of the UK but also extending to far-flung places from Canada through the Middle East to New Zealand.

It is therefore very important that we make it easy for our young GPs to put down roots in our area. This is a key part of the inspiration for our Bedford First 5 GP group. Founded nearly a year and half ago by a group of passionate GPs from both Bedford and Central Bedfordshire, our mission is to provide a safe and supportive environment for early-career GPs to come together, support one another, and grow together. The transition from being a registrar to suddenly being expected to work as an independent practitioner can make one feel very vulnerable. Our goal is to embark on that journey together and support colleagues in the process. We meet about every six weeks in Bedford on dates chosen by consensus. In addition to these regular meetings, we have online digital platforms on WhatsApp and Slack where we continuously interact and share information. We have a great deal of support from the Bedfordshire CCG, BLMK ICS, RCGP faculty, and the LMC. With the help of these partners and our members, we can offer support for colleagues, recently qualified or new to the area, to settle down. Whether you are looking to build a professional and social network or to find the best interior decorator or restaurant around, our members are usually keen to help. I would encourage any post-CSA GP registrars, newly qualified GPs, and experienced colleagues who are young at heart, or keen to share their wealth of knowledge, to get in touch with us at the email below.

Linus Onah linus.onah@nhs.net