

15 04 2024

An Open Letter from Autistic Doctors International (ADI) to the Health Secretary and the CEO of NHS England

Dear Victoria Atkins and Amanda Pritchard,

Further to your termination of the NHS Practitioner Health Programme for secondary care staff on 15 April 2024, and subsequently for primary care staff, and having seen the BMA and NHSE responses, we are specifically writing to ask you to consider the mental health needs of autistic and all other neurodivergent doctors within the NHS.


The NHS has become an increasingly harmful working environment for all staff, and particularly for autistic doctors, with the loss of offices, administrative support and team structures. There is increasing workplace unpredictability with gaps in rotas, strikes, increasing emergency workloads and inadequate IT and other support. These issues are especially challenging for autistic staff.

Autistic doctors bring significant strengths to the NHS workforce¹, and the NHS should strive to be leading the world with employment practice, support, and staff wellbeing for these valuable professionals.

Autistic doctors report many challenges in the workplace. A recent survey revealed that 77% had considered and 24% attempted suicide. Whilst 80% had worked with colleagues whom they suspected of being autistic, 29% of autistic doctors felt unable to disclose their diagnosis². Autistic people have a four times higher risk of developing PTSD³. Despite inhospitable environments, most autistic doctors are persevering and working successfully².

Anecdotally up to 25% of trainees in some deaneries are disclosing diagnoses of neurodivergence and the waiting times for diagnosis of autism and ADHD in the population are at an all-time high⁴. Both the proportion of autistic staff, and the need for doctors with insight and expertise to care for the needs of an increasingly recognised neurodivergent population will increase.

All staff in the NHS are at risk of developing mental health conditions due to the nature of the job and increasing moral injury as resources decrease. Doctors are a highly trained investment and difficult to replace. Autistic doctors bring particular skills and abilities and should be a valued resource.



We urge you to pause the current decision and consider that alternative support is not in place and accessible. Practitioner Health is not simply an unneeded alternative to existing public NHS services as it has specific expertise in treating and understanding the needs of healthcare professionals. Many colleagues have commented publicly on how much more useful Practitioner Health has been for them compared with local services, and in many cases, life and career saving. Occupational health services do not have the same remit or local anonymity. NHSE's commitment to ensuring all NHS staff receive the mental health support they need mentions using individual Trust health and wellbeing services, but these are simply not currently available for all staff and do not have the same level of expertise, treatments available, continuity across multiple job rotations or anonymity. Information online shows that wellbeing hubs around the country have closed due to national funding being withdrawn. Some Trust websites show that self-referrals for mental health support are currently closed.

Local services can deter many staff from asking for help due to concerns about confidentiality, being recognised by or having to work with colleagues who are treating them. This is even more of a concern for neurodivergent staff who are working hard to "fit in" and may be worried about any health issues being unfairly used against them.

Intersectionality and safety within mental health support as offered by Practitioner Health is a huge consideration, with many colleagues being additionally challenged by disability, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, single parenthood, financial strain, and other issues. Practitioner Health is trusted nationally for being discreet and confidential, with clear aims to improve the clinical health and mental wellbeing of the workforce and support them to remain in the NHS. This is not as simple as re-allocation of responsibility and funding to Trusts.

Please urgently think about how appropriate services will be provided today; consider the detriment of ending Practitioner Health; and consider the message being sent to the workforce.

We also ask you please to specifically include consideration of how to better support autistic doctors and our neurodivergent colleagues so that we can continue to provide excellent care for our patients.

Yours sincerely

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