

Senior doctors in England stage rare walk out

July 20 2023



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English hospitals were braced Thursday for the latest doctors' strike to hit the state-run health service, with managers warning it will leave "routine care virtually at a standstill".

The two-day strike by consultants comes amid record patient waiting

times due to a vast pandemic backlog and multiple strikes across the economy over the past year as workers battle a cost of living crisis.

The consultants' strike, only the third time the senior specialist doctors have taken industrial action, began at 7:00 am (0600 GMT) on Thursday and will run until 7:00 am on Saturday.

"This could undoubtedly be the most severe impact we have ever seen in the NHS as a result of industrial action, with routine care virtually at a standstill for 48 hours," said National Health Service (NHS) medical director Stephen Powis.

"Consultants will not only stop seeing patients themselves, but they won't be around to provide supervision over the work of junior doctors, which impacts thousands of appointments for patients," he said.

The action follows months of disruption as health staff have walked out, leading to delayed treatment and canceled appointments for hundreds of thousands of patients.

Junior doctors staged an unprecedented five-day stoppage earlier this month over pay and staff retention, their third walkout since April.

Nurses and ambulance staff have also taken strike action, eventually accepting a five percent pay rise in May.

Powis said emergency and urgent care would be prioritized "in the eighth month of industrial action, and with more than 600,000 appointments already affected, it's becoming even more challenging to get services back on track after each round of action".

'Derisory'

Consultants are calling for a "credible pay offer" after years of below-inflation rises which they say have eroded their pay.

The British Medical Association (BMA), which represents consultants, says their take-home pay has fallen by 35 percent since 2008.

The consultants, who earn annual salaries of around £88,000-£119,000 (\$113,000-\$153,000), have already announced a second round of strikes for August 24-25.

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, however, has told the doctors to call off their stoppages and warned that the government will no longer negotiate on higher salaries.

He said earlier this month the government had accepted recommendations from independent pay review bodies for salary increases of between 5.0 and 7.0 percent in the public sector.

The offer was "final", he said, adding: "No amount of strikes will change our decision."

Sunak has pledged to halve stubbornly high inflation, currently just under 8.0 percent.

He has said higher pay awards are unaffordable and just risk fuelling inflation.

The BMA called the government's offer "derisory" and urged members to join their nearest picket line.

BMA consultants' committee chair Vishal Sharma said consultants were "angry and at rock bottom", blaming the government.

"The government has had seven months to work with us to take our concerns seriously, to listen to us and to find a way to avoid industrial action," he said in a statement.

"Ministers have done absolutely nothing to stop this action taking place."

Transport workers are due to strike at the same time as the consultants with staff at 14 train operators walking out on Thursday, Saturday and on July 29.

They will be joined on Sunday and on July 25-28 by London Underground staff.

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Citation: Senior doctors in England stage rare walk out (2023, July 20) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-07-senior-doctors-england-stage-rare.html>

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