The crisis in Scottish Primary Healthcare
Introduction

Primary healthcare in Scotland is heading towards a crisis. Doctors are retiring early or going part time which is leading to a major shortage of GPs across Scotland.

The Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association have been warning of this for some time. Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, Willie Rennie MSP, has been raising this issue in the Scottish Parliament with the First Minister. We see and hear the evidence of this crisis in communities across Scotland every day.

- Twelve medical centres in Fife are short of GPs
- A practice in Aberdeen has slashed the number of appointments
- Elderly patients in Edinburgh have been told to go elsewhere because their medical centre can't cope
- There are shortages reported in Forth Valley, Lothian, Fife, Highland, Grampian, Dumfries and Galloway and more.

The BMA and Royal College of GPs estimate that Scotland will be 740 doctors short by 2020.

More than one fifth of GP training places remain unfilled.

NHS boards have confirmed that 42 practices are now under their control - a measure reserved for special circumstances and emergencies.

Despite repeated warnings, the Scottish Government took its eye off the ball during the referendum and as a result Scotland faces this crisis.

To get a current understanding on the views of GPs we have conducted a survey across all practices in Scotland. To ensure that we did not add to their workload the survey was kept brief with five key questions to be answered.

Of the 986 questionnaires issued to registered GP practices throughout Scotland, three hundred and eighty nine were returned. A thirty nine percent response rate is quite remarkable especially when primary care is under such pressure.

This shows the strength of feeling on these matters.
The Survey

The questionnaire was constructed with the assistance of healthcare professionals and sought to get a flavour of the real strength of feeling amongst General Practitioners about their workload, the challenges they face, the Scottish Government's assistance and if, in retrospect, they thought becoming a GP was the right career decision.

The questionnaire was posted directly to 986 GP practices with a return Freepost envelope. There was also an option to complete an identical questionnaire online.

GPs were able to complete the form anonymously but could provide their details so we could update them on the results. Not all responders provided details of their practice or Health Board area, however the majority did so.

Of the 986 GP practices this was sent to, 389 GPs at 352 (35%) of these practices completed the questionnaire.
The Survey (continued)

Respondents were asked to chose the most applicable answer to questions about their workload, whether they would chose to be a GP if they had to make that decision again, their thoughts about the Quality and Outcomes Framework, and the Scottish Government’s primary care plan (launched at the end of June). They were also asked to rank the top 10 challenges in their profession.

For the purpose of simple analysis by Health Board and due to the low number of practices in certain Health Board areas, some Health Boards have been grouped.

Orkney and Shetland have been grouped as the Northern Isles, Dumfries & Galloway and the Borders have been grouped as South of Scotland.

No identifiable responses were received from the Western Isles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health Board Area</th>
<th>Number of Practices</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayrshire &amp; Arran</td>
<td>56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Borders</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
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One of the most significant concerns identified by GPs was the level of their workload.

Question 1 asked GPs if they felt their workload was low, manageable, heavy at times or unmanageable.

378 respondents answered this question. None of the respondents said that they had a low workload and only 3.91% (15) of respondents said that their workload was manageable.

57.55% stated that their workload was manageable, but could be heavy at times and a further 38.54% stated that their workload was unmanageable.

These figures show the incredible strain being placed on GPs across Scotland. This was reflected later in the questionnaire where GPs were asked which issues posed the greatest challenge to them. A significant number stated that workload was their greatest challenge.
Scottish Liberal Democrats: The crisis in Scottish primary healthcare

Workload by Health Board

This shows the breakdown of views on workload by Health Board. Lothian, Ayrshire & Arran and Glasgow & Greater Clyde had the highest percentage of GPs reporting an unmanageable workload. It was over 50% in all three areas.
Views on the Quality and Outcomes Framework

Respondents were asked to share their views on the Quality and Outcomes Framework and the Scottish Government’s Primary Care Plan.

91.9% of the 378 respondents who answered this question thought that the Quality & Outcomes Framework should be abolished or reduced. This is an overwhelming majority.

A further 7.67% of respondents were happy with the framework as it is at present and just 0.53% (2) of respondents wanted to see the Framework expanded.

A clear majority of GPs felt that the Framework should be abolished entirely.
Views on the Scottish Government’s Primary Care Plan

Of the 335 respondents who answered the question regarding their knowledge of the Primary Care Plan, 180 (52.49%) were aware of the plan, with 47.51% of respondents being unaware. This shows a remarkable failure in communication of the plan to GPs by the Scottish Government.

A further question was then asked on whether or not the plan would be sufficient to address the challenges facing primary care.

In the chart to the left we have only included responses from the 180 respondents who stated they were aware of the plan, and those who were not aware have not been taken into consideration.

Of these 180 respondents, 1.11% (2) respondents felt that the Primary Care Plan would sufficiently address the challenges. A further 20.56% (37) were unsure and the remaining 78.33% (141) said that the plan was not sufficient to address the challenges.

This clearly shows that amongst GPs who are aware of the plan, there is significant doubt that it will be sufficient to address the challenges facing primary care.
The challenges facing GPs in Scotland

GPs were asked to rank a series of challenges they may be facing in order of priority, from 1 to 10, where 1 was the most problematic for them and 10 was the least.

The challenges they were asked to rank were:

- Workload
- Inappropriate and unresourced transfer of workload
- Insufficient time with each patient
- Constant changes to contracts and working arrangements
- Excessive regulation of GPs
- A poor work-life balance
- The possibility of having to work more evenings/weekends
- Complaints/concerns about litigation
- Bureaucracy
- Press coverage of the profession
- GP pay
- Frustration with the interface with hospital services
- Pension arrangements
- Worries about premises
- Management/leadership responsibilities
- Limited opportunities to specialise
- Job security

GPs could select as many, or as few issues as they liked and rank multiple issues with the same level of priority.

The three issues most ranked as a priority were “Inappropriate and unresourced transfer of workload” (368 respondents), “Workload” in general (358 respondents) and “Constant changes to contracts and working arrangements” (338 respondents).

However, in terms of the biggest challenge, one issue stood out amongst the others as the most consistently challenging - and that was workload. 49.44% of people who ranked workload as a challenge stated that it was the most problematic and 75.69% placed it in their top three.

No other issue even came close in terms of being the biggest challenge, with the next closest being the 23.10% ranking “Inappropriate and unresourced transfer of workload” as being most problematic and 16.17% ranking “Insufficient time with each patient” as most problematic - though both of these issues were ranked in the top 3 by more than 50% of respondents who chose them as options.

These responses clearly shows that workload is a major issue facing GPs in Scotland today.
The challenges facing GPs in Scotland (Data)
Would you choose to be a GP again?

Finally, GPs were asked whether they would choose to become a GP if they had their time again.

378 respondents answered this final question, with 42.06% (159 respondents) saying that they would choose to be a GP again.

However, more than a third (33.07%, 125 respondents) stated that they would not choose to be a GP again and a further 24.87% (94 respondents) stated that they were unsure if they would.

The number of GPs stating that they would not choose this profession again, is no doubt a factor in the current recruitment crisis being faced by Health Boards.
Key quotes from GPs

Respondents to the questionnaire were invited to leave further comment or feedback on the challenges facing their profession or their own circumstances. The overwhelming majority of respondents were negative about their circumstances or the Scottish Government. A significant proportion of responses raised concerns about the recruitment crisis facing the profession.

Below is a snapshot of the comments received.

“They [The Scottish Government] do not have a clue as to the timebomb about to hit them with GP numbers.”

“We need more GPs. The only way to do that is to increase funding to allow recruitment of additional doctors”

“The management and administrative side of being a GP is becoming too much”

“Lack of locum cover – 2nd year without a family holiday. Increasing demands from everyone, rising expenses and falling income”

“I’m worried that increasing demand means that I am always watching time during surgeries and have concerns that patient safety may suffer.”

If you had your time again would you choose to be a GP? “Yes, first 20 years. No, last 4 years.”

If you had your time again would you choose to be a GP? “No, I’d be a Vet instead”

If you had your time again would you choose to be a GP? “No. I am leaving general practice.”

If you had your time again would you choose to be a GP? “Don’t know. I would have to think very hard.”
Conclusion

We are grateful to so many general practitioners for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Even though this report is based on a self selected sample, the large sample size provides confidence that it reflects opinion of general practitioners.

The results are astonishing. The headline finding that more than three in ten GPs would not opt for general practice if they were making the career choice now reveals the depth of the crisis.

GPs identified workload as a major concern with only a small fraction reporting that their workload is manageable. The remainder reported that their workload is unmanageable or heavy at times.

Most would prefer to abolish the Quality Outcomes Framework of the Contract and of the remainder most want it reduced. Only half of GPs even knew of the plan’s existence and almost all of those who expressed an opinion on the plan said it was not sufficient to deal with the crisis.

It is to be regretted that the Scottish Government was unaware of this looming crisis and appears to continue to deny that the crisis even exists. The impact of this crisis is being felt far and wide and the problems that have been allowed to develop are deep rooted.

The Scottish Government published an underwhelming plan in June - seven months after they announced they would - and it is clear from GPs that is insufficient to meet the challenges.

The Royal College of GPs Scotland has published a plan for change. It addresses funding, infrastructure, IT, the GP contract, recruitment and integrated care. All are measures which must be considered by the Scottish Government immediately and urgently.