Where have we gone wrong?

The November BJGP Viewpoint article by Morrison and Gilies about the tragic death of Dr Pat Manson serves as a timely reminder of the pressures that UK general practice is under.1 I was sad when I heard of Pat’s death and 2 weeks later I became even more distressed when another GP working in rural Scotland took their own life.

These tragedies mark the tip of an iceberg. The litany of burnout, depression, alcoholism, drug misuse, and relationship breakdown among GPs goes largely unseen and unrecognised. At the same time we have a culture where GPs who are struggling are reluctant to take time out as they know that the burden of their workload will fall on their colleagues or, in the case of single-handed GPs, there may be no-one to take up the burden] at a time when many GPs feel they have nothing more to give. Many GPs now feel that ‘traditional’ general practice is being sacrificed on the altar of box-ticking bureaucracy.

Primary care has become dramatically more complex and demanding in under a decade. There has been a deliberate, cynical shifting of workload from secondary to primary care without an accompanying shift of resources and without relevant professional support, training, and development: we are just expected to ‘get on with it’. It feels like there has been a concerted attempt by politicians, with the help of the press, to smear and diminish the medical profession in the eyes of the public, which I think has worked to some extent. We now have a more consumerist, demand-driven society that talks about rights but says little about responsibility and, in many areas, treats the NHS as though it were a 24-hour supermarket or take-away outlet. This is coupled with the explicit encouragement (often by health managers no less) for the public to complain about services and an increasingly irresponsible legal profession which has fuelled a culture of litigation against doctors on a ‘no win, no fee’ basis.

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