

Why some patients are keeping their heads down

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It feels as if there is a sea change in the way patients and the public have started talking about the junior doctors' strike.

We noticed the difference first early on 26<sup>th</sup>, on Twitter – groups of patients asking each other what they thought about the strike rather than stating a definite opinion. People talking about whether it was time to stop self-censoring. Increasingly, people turning to direct messaging, or private emails, to have these discussions. The overwhelming feeling was that none of these patients wanted to go on record with their views; a call on Twitter to get patient commentary on 26<sup>th</sup> resulted in immediate volunteers amongst the enthusiastic pro-strike patients, but every conversation I had about featuring more diverse responses to the strike ended the same way. A long, detailed, passionate email full of interesting thoughts, with the final line something like “but I don't want to put this into print.”

In short, anyone using mainstream media, or even social media, to gauge public opinion on the strike is going to miss a lot. There is a below-the-parapet murmur going on. Some of the main themes coming up in these conversations are these:

We are not comfortable with doctors and politicians discussing our health service without patients being involved.

We are not happy that “patient safety” and “patient harm” is being defined by doctors and politicians, not by those at risk of harm.

We are afraid that questioning anything in the debate will lead to backlash.

We no longer know where to find trustworthy information on this topic.

We are worried that our experiences will be taken out of context and used as by one side to bash the other; we are concerned that the debate is now so polarized that any nuance will get shouted down; we are afraid of becoming political pawns.

We want to help, but we don't know how – calls for patients to mediate in this dispute or discuss what we mean by “safety” or “24/7 working” have been made very eloquently, for example by [National Voices](#) and patients are talking about how we could resolve this. Nobody is taking us up on it.

What is clear is that what is being said in these closed discussions is not “my doctor, right or wrong,” but nor is it pro-government. As this comment (reproduced by permission) on a closed facebook page sums up:

“I support the junior doctors. I don't support this strike. I really don't support Hunt. How am I going to fit all that on a banner?”