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Summary

Objectives: To report doctors' views about the European Working Time Directive ('the Directive').
Participants: Medical graduates.
Setting: UK.
Main outcome measures: Questions on views about the Directive.
Results: The response rate was 64% (2056/3196). Twelve per cent of respondents agreed that the Directive had benefited senior doctors, 39% that it benefited junior doctors, and 17% that it had benefited the NHS. More women (41%) than men (35%) agreed that the Directive had benefited junior doctors. Surgeons (6%) and adult medical specialists (8%) were least likely to agree that the Directive had benefited senior doctors. Surgeons (20%) were less likely than others to agree that the Directive had benefited junior doctors, whilst specialists in emergency medicine (57%) and psychiatry (52%) were more likely to agree. Surgeons (7%) were least likely to agree that the Directive had benefited the NHS. Most respondents (62%) reported a positive effect upon work–life balance. With regard to quality of patient care, 45% reported a neutral effect, 40% reported a negative effect, and 15% a positive effect. Most respondents (71%) reported a negative effect of the Directive on continuity of patient care, and 71% felt that the Directive had a negative effect upon junior doctors' training opportunities. Fifty-two per cent reported a negative effect on efficiency in managing patient care.

Conclusions: Senior doctors agreed that the Directive benefited doctors' work–life balance. In other respects, they were more negative about it. Surgeons were the least positive about aspects of the Directive.

Keywords
Attitude of health personnel, workload/legislation and jurisprudence, physicians, career choice, workforce, medical, medical education

Introduction

The European Working Time Directive ('the Directive') was introduced within the European Union with the aim of improving working practices with regard to working hours, rest breaks, and holidays.1 Essentially, the Directive restricts the average length of the working week to 48 hours, although individuals can opt out if they wish. In the United Kingdom, the Directive was first applied to senior doctors in 1998 and then phased in for junior doctors in 2004.

Concerns about the Directive have primarily focussed upon its impact on doctors’ training and patient care.2–6 Training in some specialties, such as surgery, is difficult to carry out effectively within the 48 hour week.5,7–9 A recent review of the Directive in the UK found that, among other things, aspects of patient care have been affected. For example, there has been an increase in the number of handovers and list cancellations.7 The aforementioned review recommended that ‘opt-outs’ by doctors from the provisions of the Directive should be encouraged and more widespread.7

In two previous studies, in 2012, of doctors who had experience of working before and after the implementation of the Directive, we found that doctors were critical of the Directive.10,11 Only one-third of doctors agreed that the Directive had benefited junior doctors (31%). Much smaller percentages agreed that the Directive had benefited senior doctors (12%) or the NHS as a whole (9%).10

In this new study, we asked doctors in 2013/14 about the implementation of the Directive and also about its impact upon other areas of healthcare, training, and lifestyle.

The aim of this paper is to report on doctors’ views, in 2013/14, about the implementation of the Directive. We asked doctors, generally, about perceived benefits brought about by the Directive; and more specifically, about the impact of the Directive upon their own experience of working in their specialty, with regard to patient care, training, and work–life balance.

Methods

The Medical Careers Research Group surveyed the UK medical graduates ('cohort') of 2002 between August
2013 and April 2014. The survey took place by post and online. It was multipurpose and covered questions and statements about their career progression, future career intentions, and views about training and working in clinical practice. Up to four reminders were sent to non-respondents. We omitted doctors who asked to be excluded, and doctors for whom we did not have a current address or email. Further details of the methodology are available elsewhere.12

The following statements were presented to doctors: ‘The implementation of the European Working Time Directive has benefited senior doctors’, ‘The implementation of the European Working Time Directive has benefited junior doctors’, and ‘The implementation of the European Working Time Directive has benefited the NHS’. Doctors could choose from the following tick box answers: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree. A further option of ‘don’t know/no opinion’ was presented in the survey.

Doctors were also asked to describe the effect of the implementation of the Directive on their experience of work in their specialty with regard to ‘Continuity of patient care’, ‘Quality of patient care’, ‘Efficiency in managing patient care’, ‘Junior doctors’ training opportunities’, and ‘Doctors’ work–life balance’. Respondents could choose from the following options: positive, neutral/no effect, negative, and don’t know/no opinion.

We analysed the results by survey year, sex, and specialty group (adult hospital medical specialties, paediatrics, emergency medicine, surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, anaesthetics, radiology, clinical oncology, pathology, psychiatry, general practice, and ‘other medical specialties’ comprising those in public health and community health). Doctors who were unemployed, not working in medicine, or with an unknown specialty were excluded from the analysis. The data were analysed by univariate cross-tabulation. We used \( \chi^2 \) tests to compare responses between groups. In analysis we combined responses of disagree and strongly disagree and refer to the combined group as ‘disagreement’, and we similarly combined agree and strongly agree to form ‘agreement’, thereby reducing the five response categories to three. We used adjusted residuals to identify subgroups which deviated from the group average.

Results

The response rate was 64.3% (2056/3196). Of those who replied, 60.8% were women (1250). Of the 2056 respondents, 69 had an unknown specialty, were not working in medicine, or were unemployed. Doctors were excluded from the analysis of a question if they left the question blank or answered ‘don’t know’. We looked separately at doctors who were not working for the NHS and found no difference in responses to the main questions about the Directive, when compared to all respondents: therefore doctors who did not work for the NHS were included in the analysis.

The implementation of the European Working Time Directive has benefited senior doctors

Overall, 12% of respondents who expressed a view agreed that the Directive had benefited senior doctors and 66% disagreed (Table 1). Men and women did not differ appreciably in their views (\( \chi^2 = 2.2, p = 0.34 \)). There was significant variation in the level of disagreement expressed by doctors working in different specialties (Table 2). By examining residuals (see ‘Methods’ section) we concluded that surgeons (6%) and adult medical specialists (8%) were significantly less likely to agree, compared with the overall average. We note that 339 of the 2056 respondents (16%) did not express a view on this question.

The implementation of the European Working Time Directive has benefited junior doctors

Views on this statement were mixed. Of those who expressed a view, 39% agreed that the Directive had benefited junior doctors and 45% disagreed. Women were significantly more inclined than men to agree that the Directive had benefited junior doctors (41% compared with 35%; \( \chi^2 = 9.6, p = 0.008 \)). There was also significant variation by specialty. Surgeons (20%) were less likely to agree, whilst specialists in emergency medicine (57%) and psychiatry (52%) were more likely to agree, compared with the cohort average. Only 219 of 2056 respondents (11%) failed to express an opinion.

The implementation of the European Working Time Directive has benefited the NHS

Overall, 17% of respondents who expressed a view agreed that the Directive had benefited the NHS, and 58% disagreed. Women (19%) were marginally more inclined than men (15%) to agree that the Directive had benefited the NHS, but the difference did not reach statistical significance (\( \chi^2 = 5.4, p = 0.07 \)). As for the other two questions, variation by specialty was significant. Surgeons (7%) were markedly less likely to agree, compared with the cohort average.

Comparison with the graduates of 1999 and 2000, surveyed in 2012

We have previously reported agreement levels of 9, 31, and 12% for the statements about whether the
Areas of work and the effect of the European Working Time Directive

We asked respondents to give their views on the effect of the implementation of the Directive on five areas of their work. Table 3 shows the overall results and Table 4 shows the results for doctors working in different specialties. For each area of work, there was significant variation in the results by specialty. Results by sex varied between the five areas of work.

Continuity of patient care. Only 3% of respondents reported a positive effect of the Directive on continuity of patient care: the majority (71%) reported a negative effect (Table 3). Men and women did not differ in their views ($\chi^2 = 5.5, p = 0.07$). Surgeons (85.1%) and adult medical specialists (79%) were more negative than the all-specialty average (Table 4). General practitioners, pathologists, and emergency medicine specialists were less negative than the average.

Quality of patient care. The largest percentage of respondents reported a neutral effect (45%) on the quality of patient care, while over one-third (40%) reported a negative effect and 15% a positive effect. Men (45%) scored the effect more negatively than women did (36%; $\chi^2 = 16.7, p < 0.001$). Surgeons (61%) and adult medical specialists (48%) were more negative than the all-specialty average. Anaesthetists and paediatricians were less negative than the average.

Efficiency in managing patient care. The majority of respondents reported a negative effect (52%) on efficiency in managing patient care, and 38.6% were
neutral. Men (57%) were more negative than women (49%, $\chi^2 = 10.3$, $p = 0.006$). Surgeons (71%) and adult medical specialists (59%) were more negative than the all-specialty average, and General practitioners were less negative than the average.

**Junior doctors’ training opportunities.** Overall, 71% felt that the Directive had a negative effect upon junior doctors’ training opportunities. Men and women did not differ in their views ($\chi^2 = 0.9$, $p = 0.62$). Surgeons (85%) were more negative than the all-specialty average. General practitioners and emergency medicine specialists were less negative than the average.

**Doctors’ work–life balance.** The majority of respondents (62%) reported a positive effect upon work–life balance. Men and women did not differ in their views ($\chi^2 = 3.1$, $p = 0.21$). General practitioners (90%) were more positive than the average. Surgeons (72%) were least positive.

**Discussion**

**Main findings**

Just under two-thirds of senior doctors we surveyed felt that the European Working Time Directive had a positive effect on work–life balance. Doctors were divided in their opinion about the benefit that the Directive had brought to junior doctors (45% disagreed that it had benefited juniors, while 39% agreed). In other respects, they were more negative.
Over two-thirds of doctors believed that the Directive had a negative effect upon continuity of patient care and junior doctors’ training opportunities. Two-thirds of doctors disagreed that the Directive had benefited senior doctors. The majority of doctors disagreed that the Directive had benefited the NHS. Most doctors also believed that the Directive had a negative effect on efficiency in managing patient care and over a third felt that it had worsened the quality of patient care.

Surgeons were critical of the implementation of the Directive, its effect upon various aspects of patient care, and its effect upon junior doctors’ training. Doctors from the adult medical specialties were also critical of most aspects of the Directive when compared with the average. Doctors from psychiatry and general practice were less critical about the implementation of the Directive compared with the average.

These doctors, who graduated in 2002 and were two years postgraduation when the Directive began to be applied to juniors, were a little more likely to agree that the Directive had benefited junior doctors, senior doctors, and the NHS than the 1999/2000 cohorts, who would already have passed through the junior stage of their careers by 2004.

### Table 3. Doctors’ views of the effect of the European Working Time Directive on their work: UK medical graduates of 2002 surveyed in 2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect of the European Working Time Directive on doctors’ experience of work in their specialty with regard to:</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuity of patient care</td>
<td>17  2.3 %</td>
<td>34  3.2 %</td>
<td>51 2.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>173 23.7%</td>
<td>297 27.8%</td>
<td>470 26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/no effect</td>
<td>254 35.1%</td>
<td>426 41.0%</td>
<td>680 38.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>409 56.5%</td>
<td>506 48.7%</td>
<td>915 51.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>724 100.0%</td>
<td>1038 100.0%</td>
<td>1762 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of patient care</td>
<td>89  12.3 %</td>
<td>182 17.4 %</td>
<td>271 15.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>310 42.8 %</td>
<td>485 46.4 %</td>
<td>795 44.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/no effect</td>
<td>325 44.9 %</td>
<td>378 36.2 %</td>
<td>703 39.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>724 100.0 %</td>
<td>1045 100.0 %</td>
<td>1769 100.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency in managing patient care</td>
<td>61  8.4 %</td>
<td>106 10.2 %</td>
<td>167 9.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>254 35.1 %</td>
<td>426 41.0 %</td>
<td>680 38.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/no effect</td>
<td>409 56.5 %</td>
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<td>915 51.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>724 100.0 %</td>
<td>1038 100.0 %</td>
<td>1762 100.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior doctors’ training opportunities</td>
<td>41  5.6 %</td>
<td>70  6.6 %</td>
<td>111 6.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>168 22.9 %</td>
<td>246 23.4 %</td>
<td>414 23.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/no effect</td>
<td>524 71.5 %</td>
<td>737 70.0 %</td>
<td>1261 70.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>733 100.0 %</td>
<td>1053 100.0 %</td>
<td>1786 100.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors’ work–life balance</td>
<td>442 60.0 %</td>
<td>684 63.7 %</td>
<td>1126 62.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>189 25.6 %</td>
<td>259 24.1 %</td>
<td>448 24.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/no effect</td>
<td>106 14.4 %</td>
<td>130 12.1 %</td>
<td>236 13.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>737 100.0 %</td>
<td>1073 100.0 %</td>
<td>1810 100.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results include 69 doctors surveyed in 2013 with an unknown specialty, or who were not working in medicine, or were unemployed.
Strengths and limitations

This was a large-scale national study of doctors who graduated from UK medical schools in 2002. All were senior doctors surveyed 11 years after they had graduated. All of the surveyed doctors experienced the implementation of the Directive when it applied to senior doctors in 1998, and then, gradually, to junior doctors between 2004 and 2009. The views of more junior doctors who had only ever worked under Directive restrictions were not sought on this occasion, and it is possible that they would hold different views. We did not differentiate between doctors who had opted out of the Directive and those who had not.

The response rate was high, but non-responder bias is, as with all surveys, a possibility. As other research has noted, it is not possible to isolate the effects of the Directive from those of other influences such as ‘the New Deal’ (an earlier contract for junior doctors) and European Court judgements.

Comparison with existing literature

Our findings on the implementation of the Directive accord with our previous study which found strong disagreement that the Directive had benefited senior doctors or the NHS. Our previous study which found strong disagreement that the Directive had benefited senior doctors or the NHS.10 Other studies and reviews have also reported reduced opportunities for training. 6,7,11 One study found that junior doctors do not want to work longer hours and do not believe that the Directive has had an adverse effect on their training.2 This same study reported that women doctors in particular did not want to return to long hours and believed that more widespread use of opt-outs by colleagues, enabling them to work longer hours than specified by Directive, would harm their own career progression.

The doctors in our survey reported a positive effect of the Directive on their work–life balance. It is not clear whether junior doctors also believe this to be the case. Despite reporting compliance with the Directive in the UK, some junior doctors are still reportedly
working over 48 hours a week.\textsuperscript{2,4,13} Research in the UK found that junior doctors still suffer from fatigue,\textsuperscript{14} and, in Germany, there was a risk of burnout for both junior and senior doctors.\textsuperscript{15}

The impact of the Directive was viewed most negatively by surgeons, and this has been reported elsewhere.\textsuperscript{7,16} A recent study in The Netherlands found no deleterious impact upon the number of procedures carried out by surgical residents.\textsuperscript{17} In Norway, a country outside the European Union and therefore not subject to the Directive, the working week has converged around 45 hours and therefore within Directive guidelines, although it has been found beneficial to have a degree of flexibility in certain specialties, particularly surgery.\textsuperscript{18}

Conclusion

Further research should ask junior doctors the same questions we asked of senior doctors, and then make comparisons between the two groups of doctors. It would be useful to survey patients, to understand their views on issues such as whether the system offers continuity of care, whether doctors appear tired, and whether they appear to be well trained, and to draw comparisons between specialties. Future research could assess what sort of doctor is likely to opt-out from the Directive (e.g. what sex, specialty, or age), ascertain their motivations for opting out or not (e.g. employability, training, lifestyle, pressure), and compare the views of these two groups with regard to the Directive.

The senior doctors we surveyed were largely critical of the benefits of the Directive to senior doctors, junior doctors, training, and continuity of patient care. Other studies have recommended that doctors need to, and should, work longer hours than the 48 hour week the Directive permits: to allow for longer and better training of junior doctors and better patient care. But policy makers must also be mindful of the benefits the European Working Time Directive has brought about for doctors’ work–life balance, as reported to us.

Declarations

Competing interests: All authors have completed the Unified Competing Interest form at www.icmje.org/coi_disclosure.pdf (available on request from the corresponding author) and all authors want to declare: (1) financial support for the submitted work from the policy research programme, Department of Health. All authors also declare: (2) no financial relationships with commercial entities that might have an interest in the submitted work; (3) no spouses, partners, or children with relationships with commercial entities that might have an interest in the submitted work; (4) no non-financial interests that may be relevant to the submitted work.

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Ethical approval: This study was approved by the National Research Ethics Service, following referral to the Brighton and Mid-Sussex Research Ethics Committee in its role as a multicentre research ethics committee (ref 04/Q1907/48 amendment Am02 March 2015).

Guarantor: All authors are guarantors.

Contributorship: TWL and MJG designed and conducted the survey. FS carried out the analysis, designed the coding scheme, and wrote the first draft of the paper. All authors contributed to further drafts and all approved the final version.

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References


