

Unlikely Militants

Andrew Rix

Honorary Researcher

Swansea University Medical School email:andrewrixhome@gmail.com <http://uk.linkedin.com/pub/andrew-rix/21/b4a/955/>

As the junior doctors' dispute rumbles along it has become clear that it is no longer a single-issue dispute. The disproportionate burden placed on junior doctors by a seven-day NHS may have been the spark but it's not the fuel. Fanning the flames is the BMA, in control of the fire extinguishers, the politicians.

It's very reminiscent of the miners' strikes of the 1980s – militant trades unionists at odds with both their union leaders and an employer constrained by a manifesto promise it has little hope of turning into reality.

However, a study being conducted by researchers at Swansea University Medical School², which looks at the mental health of junior doctors, may provide some clues about their collective radicalisation.

Hunt's decision to take on the BMA, like Thatcher's to take on the NUM, was largely ideological: not giving in to those described as militants seen as more important than solving a long-running problem.



Stress is widely cited as the most common trigger for mental illness. Causes of workplace stress include long hours, lack of adequate support and supervision, and uncertainty.

As we keep being reminded¹, successful medical school applicants are predominantly from professional backgrounds, privately educated and come from the most affluent postcode areas – an unlikely source of union militants.

One of the themes emerging from early stage interviews is the unintended consequences of the reorganisation of Foundation Training.

The old 'join my firm' system was justifiably criticised as paternalistic, open to abuse, hit and miss in relation to subject coverage and quality of experience and capable of reinforcing bad as well as good practice. But its

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<http://bmcomeduc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12909-016-0536-1>

2 <http://www.swansea.ac.uk/media-centre/latest-research/researchgrantawardedtoswanseauniversitytostudyissuesofmentalhea>

replacement, whilst addressing all the right issues, may inadvertently have sidelined many of the informal social support systems it provided and, as a consequence, the availability of flexible clinical support.

Moving from a 'team' on-call system to one where the junior doctor is at the call of the ward, as dictated by the need to spend time in a particular specialism, increases isolation and causes stress.

The comparison with the miners strike is not so far fetched. Tavistock researchers Triste and Bamforth coined the phrase sociotechnical systems³ in the 1950's after studying the changes in work patterns imposed upon miners following the introduction of mechanisation.

They found that new technology resulted in the loss of autonomous group working and led to large numbers of miners having their work broken down into single tasks, with supervision becoming externalised and coercive.

Worse, the lack of social and peer control led directly to poor safety, low productivity and high levels of absenteeism.

The social system, which bound miners into a common purpose, was lost in technologically driven change.

The resulting alienation gave rise to the militancy of later years. It had been assumed that nationalisation and new investment would buy the loyalty of the miners. It didn't.

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³ <http://www.swansea.ac.uk/media-centre/latest-research/researchgrantawardedtoswanseauniversitytostudyissuesofmentalhea>

It has been assumed that a fairer system of Foundation Training would buy the loyalty of junior doctors. It hasn't.

The Swansea research is finding that the informal system of support and advice, which operated in the consultant 'firm' model, has been replaced by a bureaucratic one with an emphasis on compliance, performance management and regulation.

Further, the group where they might most readily get this informal guidance - the registrar grades – themselves now the products of the highly competitive rotational, Foundation Training system, don't have informal mentoring as a key role.

Single-handed working, with great emphasis on formal handovers, together with a competitive culture which discourages asking questions has driven junior doctors to find their own solutions, alienating them from the system in which they work.

In the same way that technology drove out the social forces that held miners in a common purpose, standardising and bureaucratising early training has removed many of the opportunities for questioning and learning from peers.

One of the important lessons of subsequent work on sociotechnical systems is that constant tinkering disrupts informal but essential social processes: increased stress and mental illness are two consequences. Making junior doctors into 1980's style 'militants' may well be another.

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Independent Research and Evaluation Consultant
Honorary Researcher Swansea University School of Medicine
Chair, Public Delivery Board, Health and Care Research Wales
2 Brynau Rd
Cardiff

CF15 7SA mob:07778057927 home 02920 214374