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A medical ethicist's view on the junior doctors' strike (submitted to health editor (by invitation) on 12th April 2023)

Unlike most professions, when doctors abandon their posts to strike, innocent people – patients – can suffer great harm and even die. Physical and psychological injury aside, doctors' strikes run the risk of eroding public trust and confidence in the medical profession. It is no coincidence that many patients who have criticised the strikes have referred to the Hippocratic Oath, which stresses the sacred relationship between doctor and patient and the former's duty to avoid "harm or injustice" to patients. Far from being irrelevant, as some doctors have claimed, the Oath or a variant is still sworn by some doctors and its benevolent influence has persisted through the centuries.

Although doctors' duty to their patients does not entail an absolute prohibition against strikes, the justifications for strike action must be overwhelming. In my view, inadequate pay can justify a strike since the state employer should neither exploit nor underpay doctors. Such treatment is unfair and can have knock-on, adverse consequences on the health system and future patients.

However, the onus is on the medical profession to explain to the public why it is left with no alternative but the nuclear option of a strike. Even if justified, how a strike is conducted is ethically relevant. It should be proportionate and with safeguards to minimise patient harm. For example, was it necessary to remove emergency care, for 4 days, during school holidays immediately after the long Easter weekend when so many consultants are off?

Without knowing the full details, it is hard to come to a definitive conclusion on the rightness or otherwise of the ongoing strike but I feel the medical profession could have done more to explain the dilemma to the public and to convey their regret and moral discomfort at withholding their services from those in medical need.

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COMMENT BY DANIEL SOKOL

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In this strike I feel the medical profession could have done more to explain their dilemma and convey their regret and moral discomfort at withholding services from those in need.

- Daniel Sokol is a Medical ethicist and barrister.