

To Nigel Mercer, President FSSA and all FSSA Presidents

Dear all,

Many thanks for giving me the opportunity to bring you (the FSSA) up to date about the Confederation British Surgery (CBS) the other evening.

I understand that CBS remains a regular topic on FSSA agenda and that you will be having further discussions at your next meeting. As such I felt an informal update and position statement might be helpful.

Background

It is important to emphasise that the initiative to form a trade union (CBS) originated from discussions held by ASGBI and subsequently FSSA. These discussions were predicated on the fact that surgeons now work in an increasingly difficult environment and that support, particularly for any issues around terms and conditions of work, were inadequately covered.

Colleges and Associations, no matter how good their intentions, are constrained by charity law when it comes to debating the personal circumstances of their members. Bear in mind that in the UK trade union legislation makes it clear that negotiation on any issue to do with terms and conditions is the statutory right of a recognised trade union. Colleges and Associations, as charities, are bound by law to act in the public interest and not overtly in the interests of their members.

The BMA and HCSA are both recognised trade unions representing the medical profession. We approached both of these organisations seeking recognition of the particular circumstances associated with being a surgeon. Our approaches were unsuccessful.

Therefore, it was a significant step forward when we gained approval from the Certification Office for CBS to be formally recognised as a trade union. This is the first new trade union within the medical profession for over 20 years. It is the first and only time surgery as a profession has had formal recognition as a distinct trade (cf generic medics)

As such, the potential for CBS to do good for all surgeons, their families and related professions is enormous.

Trade Unions

Unfortunately, the term trade union and the concept of trade unionism has never recovered from the adverse publicity of the miners strike, Wapping etc. In this regard please note that over 50% professionals now belong to a "trade union". Most "unions" now avoid the term which has poor connotations. Hence, we opted for the name Confederation.

Those of us who were involved in establishing the CBS are not dyed in the wool Marxists with a committed socialist agenda. We have done this as we recognise that it is the only path by which surgeons' interests can be protected using the full force of UK legislation. Sadly, however, there is no doubt that many surgeons regard the CBS with suspicion largely based on historical perspectives of trade unionism.

Current situation

We have over 150 on our mailing list who have expressed interest and/or subscribed. We are receiving substantial number of “hits” on the website. I have had a number of local meetings and trainees in particular always appear enthusiastic about the concept. However, the actual number who have subscribed remains small (about 50 of which 10 are Foundation members).

If we are to realise our ambitions to develop services on behalf of members (such as surgical expert ltd, or lobbying potential) we need more members.

The success or otherwise of CBS is inexorably intertwined with its ability to state that it represents the interests of its members. It cannot do this unless we persuade a sufficient number of surgeons to become members. Membership is inexpensive (£100 / year).

I appreciate that the working surgeon has little wish to become involved with yet another organisation. A majority of surgeons already hold the view that they gain little from current affiliations. But CBS is different. We all put patients first. CBS puts surgeons first.

Proposal

I would appreciate it if the FSSA would consider donating / loaning £15000 to CBS to enable the appointment of a part time (approx. 15hrs / week) administrative officer. The potential benefits of such an appointment are obvious. It would raise the profile of CBS but also ensure that surgeons in difficulty had rapid and easy access to appropriate professional advice. It would also ensure close collaboration between FSSA and CBS.

End note

It is important to stress that CBS is not in competition with FSSA, any of the Associations or the Colleges. It came about because of a perceived need within our profession. The FSSA, as the umbrella organisation of surgery in the UK, is ideally placed to take this initiative forward.

Finally, please note that I have no personal ambition to remain the “lead voice” for CBS. I would be very happy for FSSA and or any of its Presidents to take over and for CBS resources to be managed by FSSA

John MacFie. February 2019