# Health Secretary Atkins Compares Negotiations with Junior Doctors to Peace Talks Amid Pay Dispute



Health Secretary Victoria Atkins has likened negotiations with junior doctors in England to a "peace process away from the glare of the media." She emphasized the need for time and space for discussions, separate from social media influences. Formal talks between the government and junior doctors regarding their pay dispute broke down in December. However, the British Medical Association (BMA) announced on Thursday that new talks, facilitated by an unnamed independent mediator, had been agreed upon.

The dispute, which has persisted for over a year, prompted several strikes since March 2023. The BMA is calling for a 35% pay rise phased over several years, while the government has already provided an average of just under 9% for the last financial year, suggesting higher increases would be financially untenable.

Atkins expressed in a podcast interview that negotiators should not feel pressured by deadlines or social media scrutiny, likening the talks to secret peace negotiations. She also highlighted that, along with pay, working conditions for junior doctors are a significant concern.

During the interview, she also discussed the state of UK maternity care, reiterating her prior comments that the NHS was historically designed "by men for men," suggesting that maternity care has not been prioritized adequately. This comes on the heels of a recent report from the Birth Trauma Inquiry, which called for a revamp of maternity and postnatal care, citing frequent poor care experiences.

Atkins shared her personal maternity experience, noting significant distress observed among other mothers during her hospital stay. She stressed the importance of women feeling safe and supported during childbirth and called for a culture of "non-defensive transparency" in hospitals. Labour's shadow health secretary, Wes Streeting, described the report as "sobering" and pledged bipartisan efforts to improve results.