

Professor Martin Marshall, Chair of the Royal College of GPs and a GP in East London, said:

There've been numerous times in the past when GPs have unwittingly become the target of media criticism, but the current onslaught is the worst I can remember in over 30 years of being a GP.

As well as being offensive and inaccurate, it is also irresponsible as it poisons the relationship that GPs have with their patients and undermines the trust and confidence they have in us.

You need to be pretty thick-skinned to be a GP, but these almost daily attacks on our professionalism, commitment and integrity are demoralising and wear you down. Some colleagues have described it as a 'war of attrition' and, after 18 months on the frontline of a pandemic, they simply haven't got the energy to fight back. Nor do demoralised and exhausted GPs have the luxury of newspaper columns where they can vent.

I need to emphasise that not all sections of the media have waded into the affray, some titles and journalists have actually been very supportive of general practice.

But the allegations levelled against us have, in the main, been reprehensible. As well as being described as 'lazy', 'idle' and denying patients appointments so that we can 'play golf', we have been accused of not giving our patients the same level of care that vets give to animals and of 'costing lives' by seeing patients remotely.

All this vitriol just for following government guidelines and trying to keep patients, and our practice teams, safe. General practice has been open throughout the pandemic, albeit in different way. As a result of the shift to largely remote consultations, GPs have been able to carry on working and providing essential care and services when many other parts of the NHS had to shut down. In addition, two thirds of all Covid vaccinations have been delivered in primary care.

When criticism and accusations come from fellow clinicians or other parts of the NHS, they are particularly wounding. Other doctors who criticise us clearly know little about the pressures general practice is under and being pitted against each other is so destructive at a time when the entire NHS needs to pull together more than ever.

While journalists and columnists are portraying themselves as the patients' champion, they need to realise that these relentless attacks can have a much deeper impact. They can demoralise GPs to the point that they dread going to work or hasten their decision to leave the profession. At the other end of the scale, medical students are put off from choosing general practice – with serious consequences for

patient care in the future - and those who do, often find themselves being denigrated and treated as 'lesser' medics by their peers.

The real issue is that we are now seeing the fallout of over a decade of under investment in our service. Successive governments have allowed GP numbers to fall while volume and complexity of patient demand has risen and continues to do so. GPs have long been criticised for working 'part time' when, in reality, the job of a modern GP to provide safe, effective and personalised care for patients is becoming increasingly undoable.

The solution is for the Government to deliver on its 2019 election manifesto commitment of 6,000 additional GPs and 26,000 more members of the wider practice team. We also need initiatives to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy for existing GPs to prevent burnout or their leaving the profession.

But the media can also play its part by campaigning to save general practice rather than plunging it further into the abyss.

With the strength of the media behind us rather than against us, GPs could gain the support we need to deliver the high quality and safe care that patients need and deserve, without jeopardising our own health.