



Confederation of British Surgery AGM September 2020:

Looking Ahead

On November the 8th 2017 the Certification Office approved the application to add the “*Confederation of British Surgery*” (CBS) to the UK’s list of recognized trade unions. For the first time there will be an organization, a trade union, recognized in UK law which is committed exclusively to surgeons and their related teams and families. It was always our intention to hold the first AGM when membership exceeded 100.

Some historical perspective may be useful. Since the publication of the History of Trade Unionism in 1894 by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the predominant historical view is that a trade union “is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment.” The origins of trade unions can be traced back to 18th century Britain, where the rapid expansion of industrial society then taking place, drew women, children, rural workers and immigrants into the work force in large numbers and in new roles.

Trade unionism in the United Kingdom was a major factor in some of the economic crises during the 1960's and the 1970's, culminating in the “Winter of Discontent” of late 1978 and early 1979, when a significant percentage of the nation's public sector workers went on strike. By this stage, some 12,000,000 workers in the United Kingdom were trade union members. However, the election of the Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher at the general election in May 1979 saw substantial trade union reform which saw the level of strikes fall. The level of trade union membership also fell sharply in the 1980's, and continued falling for most of the 1990's. The long decline of most of the industries in which manual trade unions were strong – e.g. steel, coal, printing, docks – was one of the causes of this loss of trade union members. In 2011 there were 6,135,126 members in TUC-affiliated unions, down from a peak of 12,172,508 in 1980.

UK trade union membership levels among employees have risen in each of the past three years (by 17,000 in 2017, 103,000 in 2018 and 91,000 in 2019) to reach 6.44 million in 2019. Employee membership levels have therefore nearly recovered from the large drop of 267,000 in the year to 2016 when membership levels among employees fell to a record low of 6.23 million. The proportion of employees that were union members has also increased slightly by 0.1 percentage points in each of the past two years to reach 23.5%. This indicates that in the past two years growth in employees that were union members has been faster than growth in employee numbers overall.

Surprisingly, employees in professional occupations are more likely to be trade union members. Those working in Professional occupations accounted for over four-in-ten (40.7%) of employees who were trade union members in 2019, but only 22.8% of UK employees overall, indicating that this occupational group is relatively highly unionised.

The declared aim of the CBS is to look after the professional and employment interests of surgeons and their teams irrespective of Surgical Royal College or Surgical Specialty Association affiliation. As such, CBS would be able to involve itself in matters relating to terms and conditions of service, contracts of employment, litigation, insurance and other matters from which the Surgical Royal Colleges and the numerous Surgical Specialty Associations are excluded on the basis of their charitable status and the 'public benefit' concept which this entails.

The CBS is emphatically and specifically not in competition with the Surgical Royal Colleges or Surgical Specialty Associations, as these have remits relating to clinical standards, education and membership activities and are not permitted to act, in any way, as a trade union.

So, against the expectations of many trade union membership is increasing and trade unionism is playing an increasingly important role in the UK economy.

Looking ahead, and against this background illustrating the relevance of trade unionism in modern society, I think it is a straightforward matter to outline both short term and long term strategic aims for CBS.

In the short term we will continue to support individual requests from members seeking advice on matters ranging from employment contracts to bullying to GMC issues to non-payment of professional fees. Additionally, in the short term we will continue to raise the profile of issues pertinent to everyday surgical practice. A good example of this was the recent survey organized by CBS into PPE issues. Over 600 responded and the results have been widely disseminated in the media. I think it important to acknowledge the hard work and expertise of Tingy Simoes of Wavelength and her team in dealing with the media

In the longer term there are two over arching strategic aims: the first is to get "surgical expert" up and running. The concept behind surgical expert is that CBS will be able to draw on the expertise of its members to provide expert reports on behalf of members under investigation for whatever reason. We are well advanced in creating a board for surgical expert and hopefully it will commence activities in the next 6 months.

The other overarching aim is to attract a sufficiently large number of members such that we can legitimately demand a seat at the negotiating table with DDRB and government. In this way CBS will be in a position to negotiate terms and conditions of service. I think affiliation to the TUC may assist this progress.