

# Trade Union Talk

With Umesh Moramudali and Ruwan Laknath Jayakody

**T**he Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA) has, as a professional body been a pivotal force in shaping the way healthcare service is provided by the State.

At the forefront in the struggles to win reasonable demands for the members they represent, they have been a boon at most times while they have also been criticized for their stance on certain issues, (as the ones in the past concerning doctors, nurses and midwives). Since the inception of the

New Democratic Front government's ascendancy to power, having as its leader, the Minister of Health of the previous regime, President Maithripala Sirisena and the incumbent Minister of Health, Dr. Rajitha Senarathne, many trade unions representing diverse sectors have once again sounded the gong on the need to urgently resolve matters pertaining to salaries, increments and allowances.

Ceylon Today spoke to President of the GMOA, Dr. Anuruddha Padeniya about the pressing issues of the hour including the much touted National Drug Policy that is in the offing.



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# TRADE UNION ACTION STILL LOOMS — GMOA

Govt. ready to rectify anomalies, but no time frame given!

**Q:** During past few weeks the GMOA had consistently spoken about issue on salaries. What is the reason for the issue and what is your position on it?

**A:** To start this issue we have to go back to 2003. During those days there was a series of strikes by various public servants demanding to settle their salary anomalies. When one union finishes striking having won their demands another union begins striking claiming they also need salary increments.

The government as well as the general public is vastly affected by this series of strikes. In order to overcome this issue and provide a long-term solution to the issue we suggested to the then government to set up a national wage policy for the public sector. Later, through the Circular of 06/2006 the salary levels and the structure of the public servants were changed in a manner in which most public servants are faced with justice. Accordingly, the ratio between the minimum salary of public servants (Recruitment salary) and a public servant of the highest grade is nearly to 1:3.8

We brought forward that suggestion in order to retain professionals in the public sector. The salary increments also took place due to the Circular of 06/2006. Now with the suggestion of certain trade unions backed by NGOs there is a risk of violating the national wage policy as it was suggested to increase the basic salary of every public servant by Rs 10,000. However,

we are in the view that the basic salaries of public servants should increase based on their post so that the ratio between different public sector employees remains the same.

Also we demanded the government to update the Disturbance, Availability, and Transport (DAT) Allowance by Rs 15,000 along with the consultant allowance which was approved by the Budget 2015 passed last year. However, due to the strong opposition of the Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) the allowance increment was halted. What happened was that once the previous government increased salaries of doctors GMOA President complained to the Election commissioner and interpreted it as an election law violation.

Then election commissioner instructed the Treasury to halt providing allowances. At that time the Treasury was planning to provide allowance increments to nurses as well. However, after Ratnapriya's action the allowances proposed not only for doctors, but for nurses too was halted. This is a huge injustice faced by doctors and the government must immediately look into the matter and rectify it.

**Q:** Isn't it unfair to demand allowance increments like this?

**A:** It is by no means an unfair demand. Doctors do deserve an allowance increment of Rs 15,000. The GMOA does not demand DAT allowance for any flimsy reason. When a doctor is attached to the

country's medical service they are obliged to take care of a patient at any given time. For example, if a patient who is in a critical condition is admitted to the hospital at the midnight the doctor is obliged to come to the hospital and examine the patient and provide necessary treatment to the patient.

For that to happen the doctor should be available and he needs transport. Every senior level public servant attached to the public services is provided with an official vehicle and a driver. Even for those who do not have an official vehicle, a transport allowance of nearly Rs 40,000 is provided. However, doctors were neither provided with an official vehicle nor special transport allowance.

That is why we need DAT allowance. Also all the professionals attached to the public service and the academics received an allowance increment of Rs 15,000.

The allowance was added to their January salary. However, doctors had not received it and it seems that we will not get it for our February salary as well.

The GNOA, out of pure jealousy, prevented the GMOA from getting any allowance increments. GNOA President Saman Ratnapriya should understand that nursing is not equal to becoming a doctor. Therefore, allowances that a doctor receives would differ from allowances received by a nurse. It is obvious that nurses do not receive allowances received by the minor staff nor nurses' demand for it. For Nurses to demand the same allowance as doctors is ridiculous.

Also our demand regarding keeping the 1:4 ratios between the lowest grade public servant and the secretaries of the public service is proposed to retain professionals in the public service. It is a well known fact that professionals are highly paid in private sector while they receive very low salary in the public sector. As a result of that, a lower number of chartered accountants, chartered engineers, and many other important professionals are attached to the public service.

However, anyone can observe that there are many doctors attached to public service. It is the responsibility of the government to provide high salaries for professionals attached to the public service for the best interest of society.

**Q:** What is GMOA's stance regarding basic salary increments?

**A:** We are of the stance that the salaries of public servants should be proportionate and in accordance with the ranks of public servants. In that way every public servant would receive a salary increment without changing the salary ratio. For example, the basic salary of a labourer will increase approximately by Rs 3,300 and the basic salary of a Teacher in the Sri Lanka Teaching Service (SLTS) 2-I will increase by Rs 6,000 while the basic salary of a SLTS 3-II would increase by Rs 5,000. Grade 1 nurse's salary would increase by Rs 8,000, Grade 2 nurses salary would increase by Rs 6,000 and a matron's salary would increase by nearly Rs 9,000. It is clear that the salary increments should differ in accordance with the grade.

Also GMOA has no issue regarding providing allowances to other unions in the health sector.

**Q:** However, seeing that you all have benefitted from free education. Is it fair to strike in this way?

**A:** Yes. We do not deny that. We must note that doctors are the professionals who remain in the public service while most other professionals leave it. We do know our responsibility and we deliver our services in the best possible way. An individual does not just become a doctor.

It involves a lot of hard work and commitment. Also GMOA has not engaged in a countrywide strike action for more than three years. While so called nursing unions have engaged in strikes on and off. We have acted with responsibility throughout and will continue to do so.

**Q:** How were the discussions so far?

**A:** We had discussions with several government officials and so far those have been fruitful. Then we had discussions with the Health Minister Rajitha Senarathne who promised us that the matter would be resolved asap. He arranged for a discussion with the officials of the Finance Ministry as well.



The GMOA thank minister Senarathne for his support. Later, we had discussions with the Secretary to the Finance Ministry, Dr. H. Samararatunga, who was in agreement with us regarding the salary ratio issue. Last Friday we met with the Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake who also agreed with us regarding salary ratio issue and the delay in providing DAT allowances.

**Q:** Is TU action imminent?

**A:** We had earlier planned to launch countrywide trade union action if the DAT allowance increment was not added to the February salary of doctors. Adding the DAT allowance increase to the February salary seems not happening as the February salaries are already finalized. However, the Finance Minister agreed upon our demands and we received very positive response from him. Yet, the minister failed to give us a time frame as to when we will be receiving the allowance increment.

At the moment branch offices of the GMOA keep calling us and urging us to go for a countrywide strike action as the DAT allowance is not added to the February salary.

There will be a very crucial meeting on Thursday. GMOA Executive Committee is meeting with the GMOA members in Central Province at the Kandy General Hospital today. I would say that the strike action is possible as the government did not provide us an exact time frame regarding providing allowance increments.

**Q:** There seems to be an ongoing cold war between the doctors and nurses. Why is there such a conflict?

**A:** We do not have any conflict with nurses. It should be made clear that we have no personal grudges against nurses. It is a particular nurses' union, namely the GNOA, who try to create a conflict between the nurses and doctors.

Saman Ratnapriya who calls himself a nurse union leader does not truly represent the nurses. Other nurses' unions, like the Public Service United Nurses' Union (PSUNU) have no issue regarding increasing allowance for doctors.

It is obvious that nursing and medical profession are two different professions hence the perks and privileges provided to doctors are also different.

Despite all the claims of the GNOA, doctors still work together with nurses in wards. Doctors never refused to provide training for nursing students. However, Saman Ratnapriya keeps trying to provoke nurses and create conflicts between the nurses and doctors and destabilize the health sector.