If we kept to our contracted hours, it would feel like working part-time

The Unison survey, Running on Empty – NHS Staff Stretched to the Limit, reveals a health service under intolerable strain (Editorial and News April 16).

Sixty-five per cent of respondents say they do not have enough time to spend with patients and 55 per cent report that, as a result, care is left undone.

This is despite the fact that half of the respondents work through their breaks or beyond their shift. I am surprised this figure is so low. I do not know of any of my colleagues who work to their contractual hours.

We all start work early, finish late, rarely take breaks and, however much it may be frowned upon in terms of work-life balance, we take work home. It is always a struggle to keep abreast of the paperwork.

If I started to work to my contracted hours, it would feel as though I was working part-time. It would be great to spend more time with family and friends. But I would feel I was letting people down – patients, as well as colleagues.

I can relate to Susan Osborne, chair of the Safe Staffing Alliance, when she says that healthcare organisations are sitting on a ‘nursing timebomb’. The clock is certainly ticking.

I believe that things are getting worse, with yet more cutbacks, restructuring and many more trusts heading into deep deficit. Without a government U-turn on funding, we are stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Sally Whellens, by email

PHLEBOTOMY IN THE COMMUNITY TAKES PRESSURE OFF HOSPITALS

When I lived in Hertfordshire and needed blood tests, I was able to get these done at my local health centre. It was a fast, convenient service, and the bloods were taken professionally. I never had to queue for long periods and the results came back quickly.

Now that I live in Hackney, east London, my GP gives me a phlebotomy form to take to the local hospital. The service is open to GP patients only from 7am to 4pm on weekdays. It is not open at weekends.

No appointment is necessary. You just turn up, take a numbered ticket and wait your turn. The phlebotomists are professional and the clinic is spotless. But the clinic is invariably busy, as all the GPs in Hackney seem to be using this service.

The average waiting time is two hours and there are never enough seats. Sometimes I have only had to wait an hour. At other times, I have waited in line for three hours. This takes a big chunk out of my working day.

Is this typical of what is happening in the NHS in London? If so, it is something that should be addressed. Community-based phlebotomy services would be so much more convenient.

Les Ilic, London

LAB STAFF TO TAKE INDUSTRIAL ACTION OVER 24/7 SHIFT PATTERN

Blood tests and other samples from Berkshire GPs will not be processed at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading, from April 25 in a dispute over reduced staffing levels and patient safety.

On March 1, hospital managers moved staff in haematology and transfusion, microbiology, biochemistry and specimen reception to a 24/7 shift pattern.

The laboratory staff, who are members of Unite, voted for industrial action short of a strike by a margin of 83 per cent and for strike action with 58 per cent in favour.

The action will involve them not processing any samples from outside the hospital. Tests requested by Berkshire GPs and other providers, including private hospitals, will not be undertaken by Unite members.

Our members want to make their strong feelings known. But, at the same time, they want critically ill patients to receive treatment.