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Recruiting doctors from poor countries: the great brain robbery?

Vikram Patel

An important impediment to achieving health for all in developing countries is the shortage of doctors and nurses. Can the NHS justify schemes to recruit staff from these countries?

An enormous gap in health staffing exists between the United Kingdom and India. India has fewer than 3000 psychiatrists for its one billion population compared with one psychiatrist for every 9000 people in the United Kingdom, a 27-fold difference. Despite this inequality, the NHS has launched a scheme to recruit senior psychiatrists and other specialists from India and other developing countries. This scheme will worsen the brain drain and inequities in global health unless it is explicitly linked with measures to enable the flow of doctors back to developing countries.

Opportunities or opportunism?

Overseas recruitment schemes are marketed primarily as an opportunity for doctors to experience one of the world’s best healthcare systems. Yet it is obvious that the NHS is trying to fill jobs in specialties where there is a shortage of staff. Although shortages are acknowledged in the promotional material for the new NHS international fellowship scheme, the difficulties that doctors will face when they attempt to return home are ignored. Experience with previous schemes, such as...
the overseas doctors’ training scheme, suggests that few doctors returned to their home countries. Indeed, when I finished my training in psychiatry in the United Kingdom in 1992, I found that few routes were available to facilitate my return to India. My work in developing countries over the past decade has been entirely funded by research grants, mainly from the Wellcome Trust.

NHS international fellowship scheme

Whereas earlier schemes recruited junior doctors, the new NHS scheme is taking highly experienced specialists, reflecting the changing requirements of the NHS. The international fellowship scheme invites psychiatrists, clinical oncologists, radiologists, histopathologists, cardiac anaesthetists, and thoracic surgeons to work in the United Kingdom for up to two years. Doctors will be paid a consultant salary and given up to £46 000 to assist with relocation and housing. Although the available materials do not specify how many specialists will be appointed, there have been over 400 applications in the first round, with psychiatrists accounting for the largest proportion of recruitments. The promotional material includes a letter from the British prime minister inviting doctors to take up the new opportunities that are being created as a result of a “dynamic expansion programme” in the NHS.

Recruitment is being promoted using the obvious advantages the NHS has over employers in developing countries. The code of practice for international recruitment explicitly states that “there should be no NHS advertising in developing countries unless that country has specifically invited the UK to undertake a recruitment programme” and that recruitment “should only be undertaken as part of an inter-governmental cooperation agreement . . . encouraging the exchange of healthcare personnel, healthcare information, and guidelines.” The promotional material for the scheme does not indicate that either condition has been met.

Apart from the immediate effects of the scheme on human resources in developing countries, the scheme could perpetuate global health inequalities for generations. Consider, for example, a country that must import expatriate doctors using scarce foreign exchange. Most doctors in developing countries have been trained in public funded medical schools. The cost of training is borne by the poor country and the rich country reaps the benefits. In effect, the people of poor countries are paying for the health care of those who live in one of the richest.

Stemming the brain drain

The opportunity to work in different societies is a rich experience with benefits that go beyond financial gains. There is no place for creating new barriers to the movement of peoples between countries. What is needed is an acknowledgment that institutions in developed countries have an ethical obligation to facilitate the return of health professionals to developing countries (box).

Summary points

The developing world has fewer doctors per population than developed countries

Schemes to recruit doctors from developing countries risk damaging their fragile health systems

Working and training in another country provides valuable experience

Partnerships between institutions in developed and developing countries are needed to encourage doctors to return

Institutions in developed countries need to reform to provide more rewarding professional environments
Institutions in developing countries must acknowledge that doctors leave not only for monetary gain but also to escape from stifling hierarchies and bureaucracies. In India, for example, doctors who want to attend scientific meetings often have to obtain a "no objection certificate" from the head of their institution. Promotions are more likely to be determined by the number of years of service than academic skills and achievements. Institutions must reform to allow professional environments to flourish by rewarding achievements—for example, by reducing routine clinical load and by providing alternative paths for career progression, honorariums, and training opportunities.

Ultimately, all concerned parties need to define the obligations and responsibilities of institutions in rich and developing countries. Unless these steps are taken urgently, the brain drain will continue to fuel the huge inequities in global health.

I thank Gauri Divan for the title of this article.

Contributors and sources: VP is a psychiatrist, originally from India, who is presently working on public health aspects of psychiatry in India as a full time researcher from a UK institution, funded entirely by a UK agency.

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Commentary: Recruitment is ethical

Debbie Mellor

NHS international fellowships were launched by the Department of Health in February 2002 to give experienced consultants the opportunity to come and work in the NHS in England for two years. This is in addition to the campaign we launched in August 2001 to recruit consultants and general practitioners from around the world into substantive posts. So far, 304 doctors have been recruited through the campaigns, 82 of whom come from India.

Most doctors have been recruited as international fellows and are using the opportunity to sample living and working in England for a relatively short period. The feedback we have received shows that they value the opportunity to work in a different health system, acquire new skills, get wider work experience, pursue research interests, and develop their teaching skills.

We operate an ethical recruitment policy, with all NHS trusts working to a code of practice approved by the Department of Health. We are committed not to recruit from a country if its government has any concerns about the effect on its workforce and work only with recruitment agencies that comply with the code of practice. This list can be obtained from the international recruitment website.

It is wrong to suggest that the health service is targeting health staff from struggling countries. Most of the staff we are recruiting come from Europe, with others from the United States and Australia.

Working with developing countries

We have worked closely with the Indian Ministry of Health in the development of the campaign in India, and it has been supportive of the opportunities we are offering doctors. The Indian minister of health and family welfare responded to a parliamentary question in July 2003 by saying that the overall availability of doctors in India is sufficient.

We are working with India and other developing countries to support them in developing programmes to retain their staff. In some cases, we are assisting them in offering fixed term placements in the NHS as part of career planning for healthcare professionals.

In addition, individual NHS trusts are putting a great deal back into developing countries. Much of this work is voluntary and receives little publicity. Many NHS volunteers spend considerable time and resources developing and providing diverse services in countries such as India, Ghana, Russia, Iran, and China. In India, for example, volunteers are providing services in mental health, leprosy prevention, neonatal resuscitation, women’s health, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV.

Competing interests: None declared.


Endpiece

A prayer

From inability to let well alone; from too much zeal for the new and contempt for what is old; from putting knowledge before wisdom, science before art, and cleverness before common sense, from treating patients as cases, and from making the cure of the disease more grievous than the endurance of the same, Good Lord, deliver us.

Sir Robert Hutchison (1871-1960), BMJ 1953;1:671

Fred Charatan, retired geriatric physician, Florida