# The Invaluable Contribution of Overseas Doctors to the NHS

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The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh represents thousands of Fellows and Members across the world, many of whom have international roots. That is something the College is immensely proud of, and we take every opportunity we can to celebrate that diversity. Indeed, the College has deep international roots, supporting international doctors through the Medical Training Initiative (MTI) and the International Medical Training Fellowship Programme (IMTF). We have an international Vice-President, who engages with our international Fellows and Members, and feeds their views back to the very heart of College decision making. The College does all it can to promote international doctors and their importance to the NHS in the UK – and this goes right to the heart of our policy work on the NHS workforce.

As you will be aware, recruitment and retention of staff is one of the most important roles of any health service. Yet in the UK, there are a range of barriers and challenges to fulling this vital task. Factors such as rota gaps, early retirement, medical student dropout rates, pension changes, poor working environment and Brexit have all impacted NHS recruitment and retention in one way or another.

Worryingly, nearly half (48%) of medical consultants in the UK are expected to reach 60 years of age within the next decade. And 40% of medical consultants will reach the intended retirement age of 62 years and 3 months, within the next 10 years. That’s according to Focus on Physicians 2018, the annual census survey conducted by the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and its sister Colleges in London and Glasgow. And according to the GMC National Training Surveys for 2019, one in four junior doctors is worried about burnout due to a heavy workload. This points major challenges at both the early and later stages of a doctor’s career.

The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh supports the increase in medical school places to meet future service requirements, however this will take over a decade to impact on

numbers of doctors and current staffing levels still need to be addressed. The College is keen to support initiatives aimed at recruiting international and European medical staff – and in Scotland, we have been working with the Scottish Academy of Medical Royal Colleges to build the network of international doctors.

Many medical trainees who come to this country to work do so under fixed term programmes, to further develop their clinical skills and contribute directly to patient care in the NHS. The fact that the NHS and our patients benefit from the skills of international doctors, while they are in the UK, makes it a truly win-win situation. Those doctors often return home with greater skills and experience. It is estimated that there are over 50,000 doctors of Indian origin serving the NHS, whose contribution has had – and will continue to have a significantly positive impact on the health of people in the UK.

The NHS has always been part of a global health economy, and I am proud that this College, along with other Medical Royal Colleges, is part of a programme - the International Medical Training Fellowship Programme (IMTF) - that is benefitting individual doctors, the NHS and countries around the world, to tackle health challenges and share expertise. With the number of unfilled posts in the NHS predicted by the Nuffield Trust to rise to 250,000 by 2030, programmes that are mutually beneficial like this should be expanded. Similarly, the current NHS spend on locum and agency staff is in excess of £300m in Scotland and £1bn in England, and this money could be used more effectively to employ more permanent staff – including those from overseas. At a time when we have many gaps in clinical service rotas we must move from a capped system for the number of trainee doctors at least in the short term.

As the NHS continues to experience rising demand, it is absolutely vital that we continue to recruit and retain a world class workforce to deliver the best possible patient care – and international doctors will continue to play an important role in this. Effective workforce plans and policies must be in place to ensure that overseas doctors can continue to work in the UK.

But we must also make sure that our workforce is valued. All NHS medical staff – including international medical consultants – should feel valued no matter what their background, level of experience, or specialty. I hope that international doctors – including those of Indian origin – will continue to have the support they require in our NHS.

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