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NHS ‘employed Pakistani doctors as cheap labour’

Investigation reveals ‘training fellows’ taken on through third-party companies paid no tax

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One of Britain’s largest NHS trusts employed Pakistani doctors as cheap labour, the BMJ has revealed.

An investigation by the medical journal discovered that the doctors, who paid no tax, came to the UK as “international training fellows” (ITF) and worked at places including the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust (UHB).

The inquiry uncovered evidence from the fellows, doctors, and a lawyer that they were being exploited through an agreement under which they were employed through third party organisations. This meant they could be paid less than doctors employed directly by trusts.

A review by KPMG of the £40.5m programme at UHB confirmed that the trust, which has more than 20,000 employees, had no idea how much of the money it paid the third parties went to the Pakistani doctors.

It also found evidence of undeclared hospitality on overseas recruitment trips worth tens of thousands of pounds, and that as many as two thirds of the 600 doctors who went through the scheme

were now working in Britain, even though the UK is barred from taking medics from “red list” countries such as Pakistan.

Trust ‘resetting’ international programmes

UHB confirmed to the BMJ that it was “resetting” all its international training fellowship programmes, and had cut ties with the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan, which had supplied most of the 700-plus doctors to the scheme. The remaining 101 “fellows” had now been offered jobs as locally employed doctors, the trust said.

Kiran Patel, the UHB chief medical officer, who ordered a review into the workings of the scheme after his arrival at the trust in 2024, acknowledged that mistakes had been made, but added that there was “no suggestion, or findings, of impropriety or fraud by any trust employee”.

Under the scheme, which ran from 2017 to 2025, UHB paid a monthly stipend to the Pakistani doctors through a small company operating from a residential address in Birmingham. In 2025, the last year the scheme operated, the stipend paid for each ITF was £3,960 a month, equivalent to £47,520 a year.

Over the eight years of the scheme, a total of £40.5m was paid by UHB to Scholar and Trainee Services Ltd, which managed the contributions on behalf of colleges in Pakistan and one college in India.

However, the trust had no contract or agreement with the company, did not receive invoices, and had no oversight of the money passed on to individual doctors.

The review found that none of the doctors had paid tax on the income earned while working at UHB, based on legal advice that they were students, not employees. KPMG believed this was unlikely to be correct, as they were providing a similar level of service as resident doctors.

Criminal record checks missed

The review also found that UHB had also failed to carry out pre-employment checks on the fellows, including routine criminal record checks – an oversight that the trust says is has now rectified.

The auditors were told there were also undeclared recruitment trips by UHB staff, particularly to Pakistan. They commonly lasted up to two weeks, during which time staff were provided with food and accommodation.

KPMG found that this hospitality was not declared under the trust's conflict of interest policies, and was not consistently recorded or scrutinised.

Since 2017, trips to Pakistan cost the trust £122,564.50, including a single visit in May 2024 that cost almost £20,000.

Responding to KPMG, the trust said: "We have a number of channels where such expenses can and should be declared, including travel costs. We do not have a specific travel policy; however, we will be developing one early in 2026."

A trust spokesman added: "A number of actions need to be taken which are complex and will continue to take time to work through." They could not confirm whether any staff would face disciplinary action over the management of the scheme.