



The NHS Headache

A report on public perceptions of the UK's healthcare system

Research by the Independent Healthcare Professionals Association - December 2017

Introduction

The NHS is in the midst of a sustained and multi-faceted crisis.

In England alone, the organisation processes over one million patients every 36 hours and, as improved standards of living and healthcare continue to bring about an ageing population, this is only set to increase.

Despite best efforts from staff across the NHS, patient care is at breaking point due to circumstances out of their control; namely ongoing funding cuts. This is leaving working hours increasingly stretched, with individual trusts struggling to meet adequate standards of service.

Consequently, medical staff across the organisation are leaving in droves, citing intense workload pressures and an inability to provide appropriate patient care as key reasons for departure. This is hitting frontline services hard; the NHS has lost the equivalent of 1,000 full-time GPs alone in the past year.

In many of these situations, shifts are instead being covered by locums; externally-sourced medical professionals who fill positions on temporary contract basis. This ensures a consistent level of patient care can be met even when hospitals are critically short-staffed.

Locum workers operate on a freelance basis and are expected to hold the same degree of professional responsibility and accountability as their permanent colleagues. They are also obliged to cover expenses for long-distance travel – often at late notice – and indemnity insurance but do not enjoy NHS benefits such as pensions, sick leave or paid holidays.



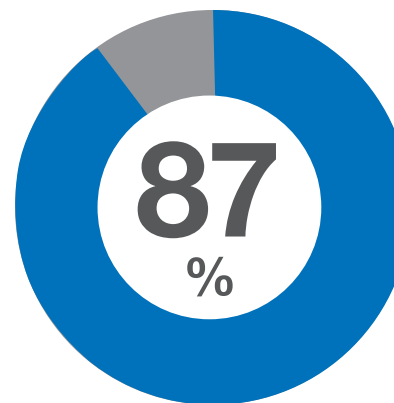
This report will explore consumer attitudes towards the NHS; whether its users are worried about severe shortages in the service and why they believe these shortcomings exist in the first place. It will also investigate the degree of risk felt by UK taxpayers when they are in the care of the NHS, and whether they believe they receive an appropriate level of care.

It will take a closer look at public opinions on healthcare workers - including locums - and their working conditions within the NHS. Attitudes towards medical staff pay will also be considered; whether UK residents believe that staff receive fair pay for their work and whether they believe medical professionals should be taking further steps to ensure they are properly remunerated for their hours.

Lastly, the report will look specifically at the role of locum doctors within the service, and to what degree their unfair treatment under the IR35 rule is likely to create further gaps in crucial medical care.

Executive summary

- 87% of the population is concerned that if current levels of Government funding continue, the NHS will be at risk of collapse in the next five years, with 50% stating that they are extremely concerned
- 85% of people said they would be concerned about current NHS staffing levels if a loved one required hospital treatment
- 86% of the population feels patient safety is at risk because of funding cuts
- Despite this, 56% of the public state they have never had an unpleasant experience with NHS staff and 78% say they have never had an unpleasant experience with a locum healthcare workers
- 48% of people believe that management, bureaucracy and wastage are the biggest burdens on the NHS, followed by patients using the service when they don't need it (30%)
- 61% of people believe that healthcare workers on temporary zero hours contracts, who are prepared to travel, or work away from home and family without the guaranteed benefits of a permanent job, should receive higher pay
- 68% are happy for pay caps to be broken for healthcare workers if it improves patient safety
- 62% believe that healthcare professionals working in the NHS are underpaid
- 75% of people are not aware that locum healthcare professionals may cost less to NHS Trusts compared to permanent staff in real terms, when additional costs such as pension, leave and education are taken into account



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Foreword

Dr Ben Itsuokor

As a locum consultant who regularly works both within and alongside the NHS, I know first-hand the difficulties that the service faces on a daily basis.

Funding cuts are placing extreme pressures on staffing levels, which are already overstretched, and this is having a detrimental knock-on effect on the delivery of patient services.

It's both frustrating and, in some cases, distressing that we are unable to provide proper patient care due to financial restrictions that are beyond our control. What's more, locum medical professionals are often portrayed as part of the problem, whilst the benefits and added stresses of our work are not fully explained.

Unsurprisingly, we have found high levels of mistrust and fear amongst UK taxpayers with regards to the NHS – something which must be confronted head-on in the coming years. We hope that this report will show that far more must be done to address the problem of public perceptions in this very public service, and that locum medical staff are very much part of the solution.

How do patients feel about the NHS in 2017?

The vast majority of UK residents believe that current Government funding falls short of what is required to maintain a good level of patient care in the NHS. Indeed, 87% of people say they are concerned that if funding levels remain the same, the service will be at risk of complete collapse within the next five years. And half (50%) of people even admitted this matter is of extreme concern.

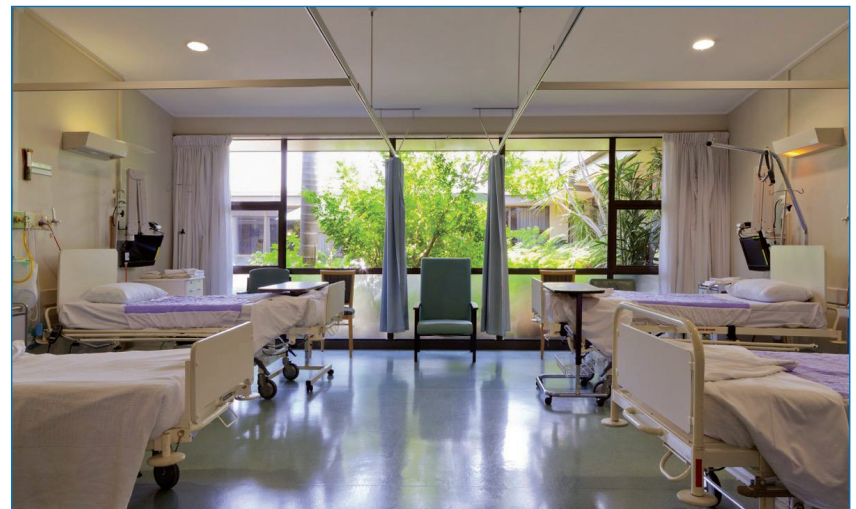
Cases such as those seen in Derriford, Plymouth – in which two healthcare professionals were left to care for more than 400 patients – are clear indications of where funding cuts are pushing healthcare organisations to the brink.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the service is such an essential part of everyday life in the UK, this concern is felt on a particularly personal level. Over four in five (85%) people admitted they would be worried about current NHS staffing levels if a loved one required hospital treatment.

Furthermore, when asked about their current political concerns, a third (32%) of UK residents stated they were worried about funding levels for the NHS. This was a higher proportion of the population than those who stated they worry about terrorism (28%) - despite a number of recent European and UK attacks - and Britain's economic future as it exits the European Union (27%).

The NHS was founded on a belief that good healthcare should be available to all, and is considered by many to be an essential British institution. Despite this, the service is facing sustained external economic forces that threaten this core principle, and the majority of people believe it to be in jeopardy.

But what does this mean in practical terms? Do people feel that this perceived threat is causing a risk to patient safety? Simply put: **yes**.



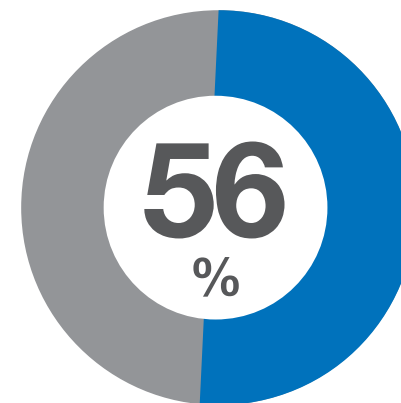


Almost nine in 10 (86%) UK residents say that they feel patient safety is at risk due to funding cuts, with the service having less money to fill both permanent substantive staff and plug short term staffing gaps with locum workers.

The overwhelming majority (90%) of the population also believes that stretching the current NHS workforce more thinly may have a negative impact on quality of services and patient safety. This is particularly pertinent against a backdrop of newspaper headlines, which claim that funding cuts by many Trusts will be unavoidable in the near future.

Encouragingly, however, more than half (56%) of the public stated that they have never had an unpleasant experience with NHS staff and a further 78% said they have never had an unpleasant experience with locum healthcare workers.

Clearly issues of funding are not perceived to have had a detrimental effect on the attitudes of staff at grass roots, who are still working hard to maintain a strong work ethic across the board.



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What do taxpayers feel is causing this NHS crisis?

Whilst reasons for the crisis are wide-ranging, current opinion shows that almost half (48%) of UK taxpayers believe that poor management, bureaucracy and wastage are the biggest drains on the NHS. From complex admin processes to insurmountable paperwork and weak leadership teams, many see an excess of administration as the service's most significant burden.

A further one in three (30%) of those surveyed claimed that patients using the NHS when they don't need treatment are crippling the service. By contrast, the use of locum health professionals is only seen as a burden on the service by 3% of people, with general staff wages a negligible point.

Public sector wages have long been a contentious topic, which never fails to capture our attention. Strikes over NHS workers' wages have been recurrent since its inception 70 years ago, with the latest of these the much-publicised junior doctors' strikes of 2016.

However, it's an issue upon which medical staff are largely supported by the British public. A consensus (62%) of people believe that healthcare professionals working in the NHS are underpaid, with just 6% believing they are overpaid.

Only one in five (21%) believe that locum healthcare workers are too highly paid. In fact, when presented with the conditions that locums are asked to work under, almost two thirds (61%) agree that those on temporary zero-hours contracts, who are prepared to travel, or work away from home and family without the guaranteed benefits of a permanent job should receive a higher wage.

Additionally, the majority of taxpayers feel supportive about NHS staff taking steps to get fairer rates of pay.

More than two thirds of people (68%) said they would be happy for pay caps to be broken for healthcare workers if it improves patient safety, with a further 57% also supporting nurses and other healthcare workers protesting and striking to increase their pay and conditions. By contrast, only 33% of those surveyed believed that strike action should not be taken.



Locums: under the microscope

The British public showed varying levels of awareness when quizzed on the working terms and stresses of locum healthcare professionals.

For example, nearly two-thirds (60%) of people are not aware that locum healthcare professionals are frequently asked to travel long distances from their home. This may be at short notice in order to fill out shift gaps across the entire country to ensure patient safety and consistent quality of care.

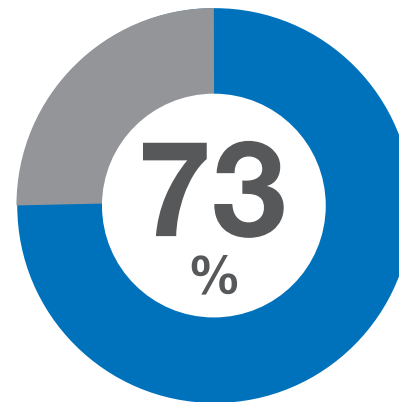
No two medical centres are the same. A locum arriving on shift must be able to fit seamlessly into their new working environment with very little guidance from other – often overworked - staff. More than half (55%) of people were therefore not aware that locum healthcare professionals are frequently asked to cover shifts in different hospitals, where they must work under the additional stress of having to become familiar straightaway with every hospital's protocols and procedures.

This stress includes holding the same degree of professional responsibility and accountability towards NHS patients as their permanent colleagues for the same seniority level. Just under half (45%) of people did not realise this was the case.

73% of those surveyed were also not aware that locum healthcare professionals do not enjoy benefits such as pensions, sick leave, study leave, maternity leave and paid holidays. Consequently, despite higher base level pay, locums may in fact cost less to the NHS when compared to their permanent counterparts.

Locum staff are also themselves responsible to pay for indemnity insurance and education, all of which is mandatory as per General Medical Council regulations. This can run to many thousands of pounds, and yet it is something that only 17% of people were aware of.

Lastly, 71% of people were not aware that locum healthcare professionals work on average more hours than their permanent colleagues and that they are therefore responsible for a large part of the NHS's care provision.



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A locum healthcare worker's perspective

Since April this year, public sector organisations like the NHS have been responsible for deciding the employment status of their contractors for tax purposes under IR35.

Locums deemed inside the IR35 tax rules had their incomes slashed by 30%-50% due to being taxed as fully employed, despite not being entitled to NHS staff rights such as maternity leave and sick pay. Locum medical staff are also required to personally cover required expenses such as long-distance travel and indemnity insurance, which can total thousands of pounds.

The NHS Improvement, the body responsible for overseeing and offering support to NHS providers, issued guidance in September which directed trusts across the UK to assess each locum worker's contract on a case-by-case basis. This came after the LDU, along with the Healthcare Professionals Union (HPU) won a landmark victory in May, which highlighted that a blanket application of the IR35 rule was unlawful because it failed to allow an assessment of each individual worker's contract.

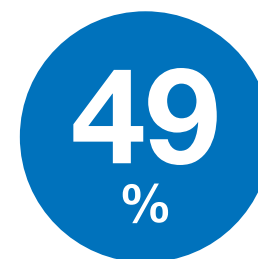
However, members of both unions have found that a number of NHS Trusts have subsequently been ignoring these guidelines.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 87% of locum healthcare professionals admitted to being likely to decline work or leave the NHS if they were deemed to be within the restrictions of IR35 tax rule.

Furthermore, almost all (98%) of locum healthcare professionals deemed to be within the restrictions of IR35 would consider seeking work outside of the NHS, with 70% considering private UK healthcare providers, while a third 32% would look for healthcare work in another EU country.

Half of locum healthcare workers (49%) would also consider working outside the EU if they were deemed to be within the restrictions of IR35. Others also claimed they would return to education or consider retirement.

Clearly, these figures could have a seriously detrimental effect on public safety, given the number of locums currently operating within the NHS.

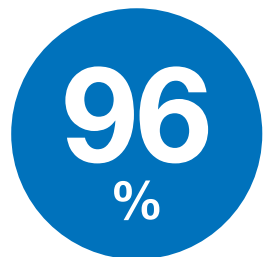


IR35

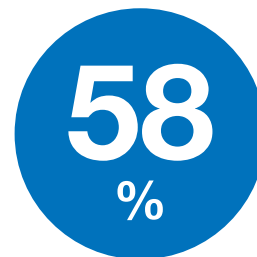
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Indeed, 85% of locum healthcare professions believe that staff shortages will cause a decline in patient safety in the NHS, with 64% saying that a reduction in NHS funding will be responsible. Over half (54%) of locums felt management, bureaucracy and wastage would be to blame and 21% think the number of patients using the NHS would cause a decline in patient care standards.

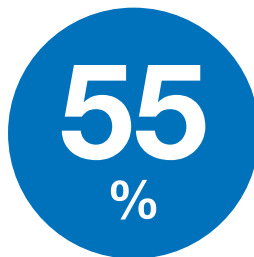
The majority of locums think the impact of IR35 will reduce patient safety in the following ways:



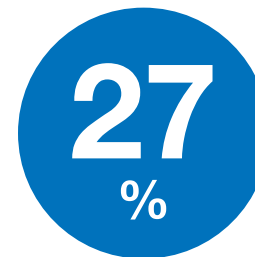
NHS Trusts having to cut budgets in order to hire HR/accountancy professionals to assess locums for IR35 – **96%**



A higher number of cancelled patient appointments – **58%**



A higher number of delayed patient appointments – **55%**



NHS Trusts are overburdened due to the amount of time carrying out IR35 assessments take – **27%**



Conclusion

It is clear from this report that there are a number of profound issues when it comes to public perceptions of the NHS, with every second person stating that they are extremely concerned about the future of the service should economic pressures continue to plague its operations.

More worrying still is the number of taxpayers who have grave concerns that, should they or a loved one need to use the NHS, their safety would be at risk.

Notwithstanding the sustained debate around healthcare workers' pay, many are supportive of; a sign that the public is not only switched on to the plight of medical staff, but are willing to stand behind them in a fight against highly limiting pay caps.

This concern does not appear to be translating to staff on the ground, who are – by and large - continuing to provide a professional and pleasant service to the millions of people who pass through hospital and treatment centre doors every day.

Despite locum healthcare workers providing a credible answer to the crisis in NHS staffing levels, they remain a largely unknown entity to the majority of the public. However, when informed of their role within the NHS network, many are in agreement that their work is both necessary and hard-earned.

It's therefore highly troubling that certain NHS Trusts are pushing ahead with unfair implementation of the IR35 rule, which looks set to drive a backlash in locum workers leaving the NHS. This would undoubtedly create even more gaps within the system, which current staffing levels are already struggling to fill.

Considering – at the time of writing – a looming Brexit, which many have predicted will de-legitimise the UK as an appealing destination for incoming medical talent, the future is an uncertain one for the NHS.

It's time for the Government to sit up and listen to a taxpaying public which fears for the safety of its NHS.



About IHPA

The Independent Health Professionals' Association (IHPA) is an unincorporated association with the mission of supporting locum health care professionals to secure their rights by negotiation, mediation and litigation, as required.

It does this by providing advice, assistance and a network for sharing relevant information and continued professional development. The IHPA aims to facilitate a collaborative culture, to bring together the shared objective of ensuring the delivery of first-class patient care.

For more information on the IHPA or to join, please visit: www.ihpa.org.uk