

UK accused of poaching health workers from poorer countries

By [Rufaro Samanga](#)

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Two doctors have [written a scathing letter](#) in the *South African Medical Journal*, criticising the United Kingdom for hiring a disproportionate number of health workers from foreign countries.



Over 1,700 health workers in the UK's NHS said they were South African. Illustration: Lisa Nelson

Professor Johannes Fagan from the University of Cape Town and Professor Mahmood Bhutta from the Royal Sussex County Hospital wrote: “The UK already has one of the highest proportions and overall numbers of overseas-qualified doctors in its workforce, yet continues to actively encourage and support overseas health workers to relocate.

Current UK immigration rules recognise all medical practitioners (as well as nurses, paramedics, radiographers, occupational therapists, and speech and language therapists) as shortage occupations, and for migrants offered such a post in the National Health Service (NHS) grant a reduced visa fee and support with relocation.”

They point out that a [recent report](#) by the UK's General Medical Council (GMC) “suggested that ‘overall numbers will need to rise further’”. The GMC report stated that the UK will require “a continuation of the large number of doctors from overseas joining our workforce”.

This position, Fagan and Bhutta, wrote “seems insensitive to the well-documented and morally questionable problem of ‘brain drain’”.

The authors criticise the years-long practice of the UK government’s active recruitment of health workers from overseas to fill in the gaps in the British health system.

Overseas qualified

They point out that in 2019 nearly 35% of doctors licensed to practice in the UK had obtained their qualifications overseas.

[Statistics](#) on the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) show that over 170,000 of the 1.28 million staff are from other countries, nearly 14%. About 67,000 are from other European (EU) countries and a further 64,000 are from Asia.

About 1,719 are from South Africa, 806 from Kenya, 4,192 from Zimbabwe and 8,241 from Nigeria. The House of Commons reports that the proportion of non-EU nurses at the NHS rose from 8% in 2015 to 22% between 2019 and 2020.

(Since nationality is self-reported, it’s possible that these numbers are overstated by some people describing their cultural heritage instead of country of birth.)

Fagan and Bhutta refer to a 2006 World Health Organisation [report](#) which found that at least 25% of doctors in sub-Saharan Africa had migrated despite only 5% of the population having access to adequate healthcare. They also refer to [an article](#) that found that migration of physicians from low to high income environments does not only have economic effects; it is also associated with “excess mortality.”

Migration vs recruiting

Professor Fagan told GroundUp there is a distinction between migration and recruiting. “I have no problem with migrating but I do have a problem with countries recruiting and I think that’s where I draw the line. I understand there are doctors and nurses in this country who want to seek greener pastures elsewhere because things are often difficult here. I do have a problem with an active recruitment process that is happening in the UK.”

Fagan added: “There are things we can do to make it more attractive for people to stay. I am also interested to know if the South African government has approached the UK and said ‘Hold on, stop recruiting our doctors and nurses’. We have an agreement with other SADC countries not to recruit doctors from there, with the whole idea of not doing what the UK is doing. So the question is whether or not we have picked up the same agreement with the UK and US and Australia.”

South African health department spokespeople did not respond to our attempts to contact them.

Mobile occupation

The UK health department, by email, denied it was actively recruiting health workers from low-resource countries. “The medical profession is an international mobile occupation and we are aware that a significant number of doctors from low-income or lower-middle income countries migrate to the UK to work in the NHS of their own accord, rather than being proactively targetted.”

“We are reviewing and updating our Code of Practice and list of countries we will not actively recruit from to protect weaker health systems, with engagement from other government departments and the World Health Organisation (WHO). We are also ensuring ethical recruitment practices are followed through improved agency frameworks and comprehensive guidance for recruiters.”

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