

The use of locum doctors in the NHS: understanding and improving the quality and safety of care

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Published September 2024

DOI: 10.3310/CXMK4017

Plain language summary

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Health and Social Care Delivery Research 2024; Vol. 12: No. 37

DOI: 10.3310/CXMK4017

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

Plain language summary

Doctors who work in the National Health Service in temporary positions are generally known as 'locum doctors'. They may be working for a hospital or a general practice just for a single shift or a few days, or may work there for several weeks or even months. Often, locum doctors are used to cover staff sickness or absence, or to provide for longer-term cover for staff vacancies. While some doctors just work as locums, others will have a permanent job but do some extra shifts as a locum as well.

The number of doctors working as locums and the costs of this to the National Health Service have caused some concerns nationally. It has also been suggested that locum doctors may not provide as good a quality of care as permanent doctors. So we set out to find out more, through two large surveys of National Health Service trusts and general practices in England; interviews and focus group discussions across 11 National Health Service organisations; and by analysing data that had already been collected about the National Health Service workforce and about clinical care.

We found that about 6% of medical care in general practices is provided by locum doctors, and about 4.4% of the medical workforce in National Health Service trusts are locums, but this varies a great deal and can be much higher in some organisations. The high and continuing use of locums in some services or areas should be a cause for concern. We found locum working could cause problems with the quality and safety of care, but that this was often because of the way organisations used locums without sufficient support. When concerns about the practice of a locum doctor arose, they were often not dealt with properly. We found that patients were generally more interested in being able to see a good doctor promptly than with whether or not they were a locum.

This research has important implications for how the National Health Service uses locum doctors in future, and our recommendations are designed to help the National Health Service use locums safely and appropriately.

Health and Social Care Delivery Research

ISSN 2755-0079 (Online)

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Health and Social Care Delivery Research (HSDR) was launched in 2013 and is indexed by Europe PMC, DOAJ, INAHTA, Ulrichsweb™ (ProQuest LLC, Ann Arbor, MI, USA), NCBI Bookshelf, Scopus and MEDLINE.

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Editorial contact: journals.library@nihr.ac.uk

This journal was previously published as *Health Services and Delivery Research* (Volumes 1–9); ISSN 2050-4349 (print), ISSN 2050-4357 (online)

The full HSDR archive is freely available to view online at www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/hsdr.

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This article

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HSDR programme or one of its preceding programmes as award number NIHR128349. The contractual start date was in September 2020. The draft manuscript began editorial review in February 2023 and was accepted for publication in September 2023. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HSDR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' manuscript and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this article.

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