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**Locum doctors in the NHS: understanding and improving the quality and safety of care**

**Introduction**

This brief FAQ provides information about a research project which is examining how temporary or locum doctors work in the NHS, what they do, how their work is organised, and what effects that might have on the quality and safety of healthcare for patients. Our aim is to help find ways to improve the working arrangements for locum doctors and the quality and safety of patient care they provide.

Contact details for the research team are at the end of this FAQ – and you can also find out more on our website at https://www.ihpo.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/the-use-of-locum-doctors-in-the-nhs/

**What are locum doctors and what do they do in the NHS?**

Locum doctors are essential for maintaining continuity of service as healthcare organisations use them to provide workforce capacity and flexibility – for example to cover gaps in rotas due to absence or recruitment and retention problems, and also to fill service gaps in underserved or shortage specialties and areas. However, the numbers of doctors working in temporary positions (usually known as locums) in the NHS has doubled in recent years, and the term “locum” refers to a heterogeneous group of staff who vary both in seniority/experience and in how long they work in an organisation (from just a few days to many months). There are some concerns both about the quality and safety of locum practice and about the way NHS organisations use locum doctors. Some high profile examples of locum failures in care over recent years have contributed to those concerns about the quality and safety of locum doctors. Locum doctors are sometimes perceived negatively by patients, other healthcare professionals and NHS leaders.

There is little actual evidence that locum doctors provide care which is of a lower quality or less safe than permanent doctors. But we do know that locum doctors are more likely to be the subject of complaints, more likely to have those complaints subsequently investigated, and more likely to be subject to sanctions by the General Medical Council. Locum doctors may present a greater risk to quality and safety because they often work in unfamiliar teams and settings, and are less likely to receive proper oversight and necessary support from colleagues and employing organisations.

The way that locum doctors work in the NHS is changing. For example, some organisations make increasing use of internal staff banks, new medical staff roles or other arrangements to provide staffing flexibility instead of or alongside using locums, and some doctors value the flexibility and autonomy that locum practice may offer them and its benefits for their work-life balance.

**What is the research about?**

Our research will find out where locum doctors work in the NHS in England, what kinds of work they do, and how the use of locum doctors is organised. Very little research has been done about locum doctors, so we don’t really know whether or why there are differences in the quality and safety of care between locum and permanent doctors. It is clear that a better understanding of the quality and safety of locum doctors working in the NHS is needed, and could help to find ways to improve the working arrangements for locum doctors and the quality and safety of patient care.

NHS organisations need the flexibility and staffing capacity provided by using locum doctors, and our research will help them to understand how best to use locums, and how to ensure that locum doctors can provide safe, high quality care.

**Who is conducting and funding the research?**

The research is being conducted by a team of researchers from the University of Manchester. The research is being led by Professor Kieran Walshe, and the lead researchers are Dr Jane Ferguson and Dr Thomas Allen. There is a Project Advisory Group chaired by Dr Paul Twomey, Medical Director (North), NHS England/Improvement. We have an active Patient and Public Involvement Forum and always welcome patient and public interest in what we are doing.

The research is funded by a grant from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR128349) awarded by the Health Services and Delivery Research programme through a competitive, peer-reviewed process. The research has ethical approval from the Health Research Authority (REC reference: 20/NW/0386).

**How can I find out more or get involved?**

You can find out more about the research on our website at: <https://www.ihpo.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/the-use-of-locum-doctors-in-the-nhs/>

There you will find links to reports and journal papers arising from or connected to the research, and details of the research team and the Project Advisory Group. The research team always welcomes opportunities to attend meetings, seminars and other forums to present and discuss the research with stakeholders who include representatives from the GMC, HEE, NHSEI, PPI groups and locum doctor agencies.

**How to contact us**

The research team is based at the Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Booth St West, Manchester M13 9PL. The main contact details are:

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