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•Overseas Medical Professionals: The Case for Testing for Communicable Diseases

Summary

1. There is, at present, no requirement for doctors or nurses from overseas to undergo medical tests in order to join their professional register in the United Kingdom. Yet there has been a very rapid increase in the numbers arriving to work here, including many from countries with high prevalence rates of serious diseases. Compulsory screening should now be introduced for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and Hepatitis B before medical staff are recruited from overseas.

Overseas Medical Professionals

2. The Government's policy of rapidly increasing the numbers of front-line medical staff working in the NHS has led to large-scale recruitment from overseas.

3. In 2002/03, over 40 per cent of the 31,775 nurses joining the register were from abroad [1] whilst in 2003, nearly three quarters of the 15,549 doctors who joined the register qualified outside the UK [2].

4. The tables below show the top ten source countries for doctors and nurses respectively, from outside the EU [3], joining the register, in the most recent year available (2003 for doctors; 2002/03 for nurses). Prevalence rates for HIV [4], tuberculosis [5] and Hepatitis B [6] are shown for these countries, as well as for the UK, by way of comparison.

Doctor

Country	Number	HIV	TB	Hep B
UK	4,731	0.2	13	low
South Africa	3,201	1.5	534	high
India	2,983	0.9	287	intermediate
Australia	2,104	0.1	6	low
Pakistan	633	0.1	359	intermediate
New Zealand	577	0.1	11	low
Hong Kong	524	0.1	N/A	high
Jamaica	313	1.2	10	intermediate
Singapore	275	0.2	43	intermediate
Nigeria	176	5.4	623	high
Sri Lanka	134	0.1	72	intermediate

Sources: General Medical Council website <http://www.gmcpressooffice.org.uk>

UNAIDS 2004 Report on Global AIDS Epidemic WHO Global Tuberculosis Database WHO Communicable Disease Surveillance & Response (CSR)

Nurses and Midwives

Country	Number	HIV	TB	Hep B
UK	18,216	0.2	13	low
Philippines	5,593	0.1	517	high
India	1,830	0.9	287	intermediate
South Africa	1,368	21.5	534	high
Australia	920	0.1	6	low
Nigeria	509	5.4	623	high
Zimbabwe	485	24.6	703	high
New Zealand	282	0.1	11	low
Ghana	251	3.1	381	high
West Indies	208	N/A	N/A	intermediate
Pakistan	172	0.1	359	intermediate

Sources: Nursing and Midwifery Council

UNAIDS 2004 Report on Global AIDS Epidemic

WHO Global Tuberculosis Database

WHO Communicable Disease Surveillance & Response (CSR)

5. The tables show that, in the years examined, 3,200 doctors and 1,300 nurses arrived from South Africa, where the HIV rate is 1 in 5. South Africa also has a high incidence of TB and Hepatitis B yet none of these recruits were tested for any of these communicable diseases. The same applies to nearly 500 nurses from Zimbabwe.

6. In addition, nearly 4,000 doctors and 8,000 nurses were recruited from countries with high rates of TB.

7. 700 doctors and about 6,000 nurses came from areas of high incidence of Hepatitis B.

8. There is a reliable and accurate test for HIV. Hepatitis B can also be tested. Indeed, it is a condition of admission to a British medical school. Testing for TB can produce false positives but for the numbers involved further tests could be conducted to resolve any doubt.

Conclusion

9. The rapid increase in the recruitment of overseas medical staff has ignored the risk of importing additional infection into Britain. The very high incidence of serious communicable diseases in many of the countries of recruitment is such as to require the urgent introduction of screening for medical staff recruited overseas.

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