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EDITORS' BLOG

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Call to aid global health systems

The UK must do more to help support the health systems in developing countries, the former chief of the NHS has said.

Lord Crisp says south-east Asian and African nations are struggling to tackle disease due to a shortage of health workers and equipment.

In a government-commissioned report, he recommends the NHS should offer more help to train health workers.

He also calls for an eBay-style website to be set up so countries can advertise their need for resources.

The government and health leaders have been reflecting on their responsibility to developing countries in recent years.

A third of NHS doctors and one in 10 nurses come from abroad, prompting critics to argue the UK has been stealing health workers from the most needy countries.

Last year, immigration controls were tightened, partly reflecting these concerns and the increasing number of students taking part in medical training.

There is now a shortage of 4.3m health workers globally, with the biggest problems in sub-Saharan Africa and south-east Asia.

The UK already contributes over £1bn a year to Africa for health, education and water services, while agencies such as Oxfam and Save the Children have a strong track record in supporting health systems.

But Lord Crisp says there is need for a more co-ordinated approach.

He warns that if this does not happen, the Millennium Development Goals on health - to reduce child and maternal deaths, and combat Aids, TB and malaria - would not be met.

Blueprint

His report calls for an NHS scholarship scheme to help with training and recommends a set amount of aid funds to be set aside for health workers.

It also says there should be a Global Health Partnership Centre to act as a "one-stop shop" offering information to individuals and organisations wanting to help global health systems.

And he adds that an eBay-style website, called Global Health



There is a shortage of over 4m health workers globally

“ Lord Crisp's report now gives the platform for action... What are we waiting for? ”

Dr Andrew Purkis,
Tropical Health and Education
Trust

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Exchange, should be established so developing countries can advertise the need for certain resources.

The report says NHS hospitals could also offer redundant equipment through the website, while health workers could volunteer their services.

Health workers who want to work in developing countries should be able to return to their jobs and suffer no break in pension contributions, it adds.

Judith Brodie, director of the international development charity VSO UK, said the report offered an "excellent blueprint" of what the UK should do.

"For too long the UK has benefited from the skills of overseas health workers, often from developing countries.

"Now it is our turn to use our extensive public health expertise to support developing countries as they rebuild fragile health systems decimated by years of neglect."

'Crucial contribution'

Dr Andrew Purkis, chief executive of the Tropical Health and Education Trust, which was set up in 1988 to help improve links between the NHS and developing countries, said: "Lord Crisp's report now gives the platform for action. What are we waiting for?"

The recommendations also received the backing of doctors.

James Johnson, chairman of the British Medical Association, said: "The NHS can do a huge amount to contribute to healthcare in the developing world through partnership working.

"Scholarships, international exchanges and limited length training schemes are all enormously valuable."

Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt said Lord Crisp's report was a "crucial contribution".

"Government now needs to look at how it can work together to take forward these recommendations, to support developing country plans and add practical value to work already under way."

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