



MEDIA RELEASE

Follow-up reviews in the Health and Social Care Sector: Locum Doctors and Patient Safety

Soaring costs in relation to locum doctors and clinical negligence claims are putting Northern Ireland's health system under serious financial pressure, according to two reviews published today (Tuesday 9 April) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Mr Kieran Donnelly's report on Locum Doctors and Patient Safety presents the findings of follow-up examinations into two key areas within the sector previously reviewed by NIAO and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). The reviews assess progress in addressing PAC's recommendations for improvements in both areas.

Locum Doctors

Since the NIAO last reported, total expenditure on locum doctors has almost trebled to £83 million (from £28.4 million in 2011-12). By 2017-18, both the Northern and Western Trusts spent over 22 per cent of their total medical pay bill on locums.

In addition, the review found that Trusts are very heavily reliant on locum doctors provided via agency, which are more expensive than using HSC doctors to provide cover. Total agency spend has risen from £23.1 million in 2011-12 to £73.5 million in 2017-18, and now accounts for 90 per cent of expenditure on locum doctors. Most Trusts are also increasingly reliant on non-contracted agencies, which often charge the highest rates. In 2017-18, £21.3 million (29 per cent of the total agency spend) was paid to non-contracted agencies.

Commenting on the findings, Mr Donnelly said:

“The health and social care sector’s heavy reliance on locum doctors is becoming unsustainable, with rising costs placing local health budgets under huge strain. Efforts taken to reduce this dependency have had very limited success. To help ensure that patients’ needs are best met and provide better value for money, it is now imperative that the Department and Trusts collectively progress the transformation agenda and formulate strategies for delivering a suitably resourced and sustainable medical workforce.”

Patient Safety

Since NIAO last reported, the total costs of settling clinical negligence claims and the estimated costs for unsettled cases have increased by 56%, from £252.3 million (for the period 2007-8 to 2011-12) to £393.5 million (for the period 2012-13 to 2016-17).

The review also notes evidence that HSC staff have been reporting a high proportion of patient safety incidents, which can potentially help the sector learn and share lessons. The total number of Adverse Incidents reported has increased from almost 75,000 in 2012-13, to 92,000 in 2017-18. In addition, the 2015 HSC staff survey found that 95 per cent of survey respondents reported the last incident they witnessed.

Less positively, other survey findings suggest that only 53 per cent of HSC staff were comfortable raising concerns with senior staff, and only 54 per cent were confident that their employer would address concerns. The number of Serious Adverse Incidents (SAIs) reported has reduced, from 626 in 2015, to 198 and 349 in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

The Department has subsequently undertaken preparatory work on developing a statutory ‘duty of candour’ for Northern Ireland, which would require patients to be told that a safety incident has occurred. However, full implementation of this will require ministerial approval. Although PAC previously highlighted that enhanced information systems were required to assist learning, a regional learning system has not yet been developed. The Department and Trusts are currently undertaking work to try and enable the HSC sector to participate by 2020 in a new patient safety management information system being developed for use in England and Wales. Greater progress has been made in addressing PAC’s concerns in two other areas. Patients and families are being increasingly involved in the investigations of

SAIs, and annual appraisal and personal development plans are being completed for a higher proportion of HSC staff.

Commenting on the findings, Mr Donnelly said:

“The very significant rise in the costs of settling clinical negligence claims is concerning. These costs divert scarce resources away from frontline services and potentially result in patients waiting longer for treatment.

“Whilst steps have been taken to try and enhance local patient safety standards, and evidence suggests that more incidents are being reported, further work is required to embed a strong safety culture across the HSC sector. It is essential that the HSC sector exercise constant vigilance in this area to ensure the safety of patients.”

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He, and the NIAO, are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. This report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01hrs on 9 April 2019.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Denver Lynn or Roger McCance (028 9025 1000).
4. The Northern Ireland Audit Office previously reported on locum doctors in July 2011 and patient safety in October 2012, with PAC issuing their reports in March 2012 and February 2013.
5. A 'locum doctor' is a professionally-qualified medical practitioner who temporarily covers for staff shortages or unexpected workload peaks. They can be either employed through an agency or be HSC Trust's own directly employed staff working additional hours.
6. 'Contracted agencies' are agencies with whom the Department has agreed contractually binding rates of payment. Contractually binding rates of payment have not been agreed with 'non-contracted' agencies.

7. The annual cost of employing a non-contracted locum can be as high as £242,000 for trainee and middle ranking doctors, and £376,000 for a consultant. The maximum costs for contracted agency locums are between £158,000 to £187,000 for Junior and middle ranking doctors and £316,000 for a consultant.