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The Medical Fair and Ethical Trade Group was instigated in 2007 to investigate, promote and facilitate fair and ethical trade in the production and supply of commodities to the healthcare industry. It includes stakeholders from UK Government, NHS Supply Chain, the Association of British Healthcare Industries, NGOs and academics. It is currently funded by the UK Department of Health as part of its global health strategy⁹, but acts as an independent body.

References (all available online for free)

- 1 Bhutta MF. Fair trade for surgical instruments. *BMJ* 2006; 333: 297-99
- 2 Bjurling K. *The Dark side of Healthcare*. Stockholm: Swedwatch; 2007
- 3 *The Guardian*, 22nd October 2004
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- 5 NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency and Ethical Trading Initiative. *Framework for an ethical procurement strategy for the healthcare sector*; 2008
- 6 Bhutta MF. Fair and ethical trade in health procurement. *Lancet* 2008; 372: 1935-37
- 7 NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency. *Ethical Procurement for Health*; 2009
- 8 NHS Supply Chain. *Supplier code of conduct*; 2008
- 9 Department of Health. *Health is Global*; 2008

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FAIRÐICAL TRADE IN HEALTHCARE

a practical guide for doctors



BACKGROUND

The provision of healthcare goods and services is big business: the NHS alone spends £20 billion on procurement every year. The market for such commodities is global, and increasingly is being outsourced to minimize costs. Unfortunately there is evidence that such outsourcing is harming basic labour rights, and consequently the health of populations elsewhere.

For example, there are documented problems in the manufacture of surgical instruments. Although most surgical instruments are supplied by companies in Europe or the US, at least a fifth are produced in northern Pakistan. Labourers in surgical instrument manufacture are often paid less than US\$1 per day, have poor job security, have woefully inadequate protection of health and safety, and many employees are children, some as young as seven¹. There are also issues with textile supplies to healthcare. One study of a healthcare uniform manufacturer in India found illegal working hours and the use of child labour². In addition there have been reports of unfair remuneration of cleaners³ and of construction workers⁴ employed on NHS sites, through outsourced contracts. A report by the Ethical Trading Initiative in 2008 suggested a significant risk of abuse of labour standards in a variety of goods and services procured by the NHS⁵.

It seems paradoxical to provide healthcare using goods and services that may actually harm health because they fail to protect basic labour rights. However, because the levels of spend are so vast in healthcare, the medical community also has the capacity to change this, and to significantly impact upon global trade, and consequently global health⁶. Ethical purchasing doesn't have to mean more expensive, nor does it mean compromising on quality.

Ensure that you and your NHS organisation insist upon fair and ethical trade in the procurement of goods and services.

If you would like more information or more support, contact the BMA at the e-mail address provided overleaf.

FOUR THINGS YOU CAN DO

1

ASK YOUR CHIEF EXECUTIVE TO ADOPT ETHICAL PROCUREMENT INTO YOUR INSTITUTION'S POLICY

The NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency has produced *Ethical Procurement for Health*:⁷ a step-by-step guide to assist NHS institutions in achieving this. But this must not just be a paper exercise, there must be regular assessments and updates on progress.

2

ASK HEALTHCARE SUPPLIERS WHERE, AND UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS THEY PRODUCE THEIR GOODS

NHS Supply Chain has a Code of Conduct⁸ that all suppliers should adhere to. Consultation with suppliers and with procurement directors has made it clear that, as the end-user, healthcare professionals are the key group to bring about change. Evidence from other sectors suggests that even a few people asking this question can have a significant impact.

3

JOIN YOUR COLLEAGUES TO FORM AN "ETHICAL TRADE INTEREST GROUP" IN YOUR INSTITUTION

Procurement in the NHS is complex. A group that meets regularly and includes members from healthcare professionals, the procurement team and senior management can help to overcome barriers. You may want to appoint an "ethical champion" who can advise and report to the Trust board.

4

TELL OTHERS

Communicate the idea to your colleagues – the more support the better. Download materials from our website: why not show these at your next medical meeting? Could you involve local patient groups or local media?