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Press release

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Scottish hospitals could save £6 million a year by more efficient use of locum doctors

The NHS in Scotland could save almost 15 per cent of the money it spends on locum doctors in hospitals – or about £6 million a year – through better planning and procurement.

An Audit Scotland report published today, *Using locum doctors in hospitals*, says health boards spend around £47 million a year on locum doctors in hospitals. Locums are doctors of any grade or specialty who provide temporary staffing cover at any time. This spending has doubled in the past decade but, in many cases, health boards are not always clear about why locum doctors are being hired and how long they are using them for.

Auditor General for Scotland, Robert Black, said:

“Locum doctors have an important role in ensuring hospitals are adequately staffed and provide good quality patient care around the clock. In recent years, the demand for locum doctors has risen due to workforce issues such as increased difficulty in filling vacancies and the impact of European legislation governing working hours.

“Health boards need better information about why and when they use locum doctors; the grades and specialties of doctors they are hiring as locums; and whether locum doctors are existing employees or from agencies. With better information, boards could improve their workforce planning and use locum doctors more cost-effectively.”

The report also says the NHS needs to get better at managing the potential risks to patient safety of using locum doctors. This is particularly important for locum doctors who are hired through private agencies as they may be unknown to the board and unfamiliar with the hospital in which they are working.

Health boards across Scotland need to be consistent in the way they screen and induct locum doctors and the way they manage their performance. For example, pre-employment checks are not always formalised, induction arrangements are variable across different health boards, and feedback on locums’ performance is mainly verbal, with few written assessments or records. There are no formal systems for sharing information about individual locum doctors between boards.

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Notes to editors

1. NHS boards spent about £47 million on locum doctors in 2008/09, which is 4.3 per cent of overall medical staffing spending. This is approximately double the amount spent in 1996/97 in real terms. In 2008/09, NHS boards spent at least £20 million on internal locum doctors and £27 million on agency locums. Due to inconsistencies in the way NHS boards record expenditure on internal locum doctors, it is only possible to estimate total expenditure on locum doctors.
2. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 can be found on Audit Scotland’s website www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
3. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland.
4. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Government and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament.