



Leveraging the experiences of NHS staff volunteering overseas to harness innovation

Making use of the THET Innovation Toolkit

As a publicly funded healthcare system, the NHS has financial and system challenges that innovations from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) can help to address. As a result of their commonly low financial investments, these innovations are referred to as frugal innovations.

NHS staff volunteering overseas experience these frugal innovations but support and processes often aren't in place to facilitate sharing them with colleagues and the wider NHS.

This briefing summarises the role and opportunity for NHS managers to support identifying and adopting innovations into the NHS, via staff undertaking voluntary work in LMIC countries.

Key points

- Innovations come in many forms, but to be defined as such their application must improve a healthcare service.
- Innovations developed in LMICs (frugal innovations) could have significant benefits to the NHS.
- The NHS has a long history of participating in overseas development, but the full benefits of this to the NHS are often underappreciated.
- NHS managers have a significant role to play in supporting NHS participation in overseas development work and in sharing learnings from it, but this has been long underutilised.
- Pre-departure preparation, dissemination insight and creating a supportive environment are just some of the areas where managers can have an impact on maximising the experience and benefits of volunteering overseas.

Introduction

Clinical staff and others within the NHS have a long history of engaging in voluntary work in LMICs, both in their own time, and supported by their employers. Arrangements may be via an external organisation; arranged informally through staff connections; or may be part of a more formal organisational- or NHS-wide relationship or scheme with international partners.

Popular opinion has long accepted that the NHS donates time, resources and services to lower-income partner countries without receiving significant return on this investment beyond personal development for participating individuals and an increased appreciation for the NHS. The benefits, however, go beyond this.

Innovation: what it is

While there is no single accepted definition of what an innovation is or what it does in the context of healthcare, those working in this space agree that there are features common across all innovations:

Innovations are unique tools or processes that address a specific need, improve a process or overcome a challenge that ultimately supports the more effective delivery of safe, sustainable and equitable healthcare services.

Frugal innovation and COVID-19

While not in the context of LMIC-developed innovation, the importance of frugal innovations has been demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Various parts of the NHS have made use of frugally developed innovations to support service delivery, some of which will likely be retained even after the pandemic is over. It is this commitment to what works, regardless of where it is from or what it costs to develop, that underpins frugal innovations.

What the NHS can gain from staff volunteering overseas

The NHS is increasingly recognising wider systemic benefits of staff volunteering overseas, particularly in terms of a positive reputation that encourages recruitment and retention, both in the UK and overseas. However, the NHS is not systematically harnessing potential benefits in terms of innovations and opportunities to learn.

All systems have something to learn and something to teach, including the NHS. As a publicly-funded health system facing financial and population health challenges, the NHS can and should seek to benefit from frugal innovations. Further, it has an obligation to patients to use these innovations where appropriate.

Why the NHS has been slow to harness innovations

There are two main factors that contribute to frugal innovations being missed:

- **Perceived power imbalance:** The relationship between high- and low-income partners tends to be unequal, with the power balance still firmly skewed towards that of the high-income partner. Central to this power imbalance is an unconscious bias that high income partners have little to learn from their low-income partners, and valued innovations come from high-income countries. In fact, the inverse is often true: many low-income partners have been doing more with less for a long time.
- **Lack of a systematic and coordinated approach:** NHS managers tend not to play a significant role in their staff volunteering overseas, resulting in reduced opportunities for a systematic and coordinated approach to identifying, evaluating and adopting innovation.

How NHS managers can support staff participation and learnings

Central to effectively identifying and adopting innovation is a domestic environment that:

- supports, encourages and celebrates staff participation in overseas activity
- appropriately prepares staff for working in low- and middle-income settings
- builds lasting relationships with international partners
- highlights the benefits of effective engagements to the NHS and patients.

The [THET Innovation Toolkit](#), developed with Imperial College London to support the flow of innovation, recommends the following approaches:

Help staff prepare for their overseas experience: time, champions and mentors

Financial resources may be limited to support staff undertaking international placements overseas, but NHS managers can help by providing dedicated time and space for staff to prepare, learn about the culture and healthcare setting that they will be working in, and prepare to identify innovation.

At the heart of this preparation are mentors and champions, staff with extensive experience of working in these settings. Such is the diversity of the NHS workforce, there will likely be staff working across the organisation, at all levels and job roles, with experience of working in LMIC healthcare settings, either in their home nation or in a previous voluntary capacity. Many of these individuals will have a wealth of knowledge and experience about what staff can expect and how they can get the most from their time working in this new environment and will be happy to share this knowledge. Identifying these people and supporting and encouraging them to share their knowledge will lead to better-prepared staff who can effectively engage with partners in LMICs and be in a better position to identify innovations within these new environments.

Support staff to identify and confront unconscious bias

If NHS managers are to support the preparation of staff with the aim of identifying innovations developed within LMICs, then overcoming unconscious bias towards these lower-resource healthcare settings

should form a part of this coordinated preparation. Pre-departure training can be used to ensure staff are prepared to take full advantage of potential learning opportunities when they are exposed to different methods, processes and ways of thinking. The THET Innovation Toolkit recommends a range of tools such as implicit association tests (IAT), developed by Harvard University, to help staff to identify any unconsciously held attitudes and beliefs that could prevent them from being open to learning from professionals overseas.

Recognise and reward participation

NHS staff often undertake their voluntary work on top of their regular duties and in many cases use their annual leave to undertake overseas placements. Even if included within their regular role, overseas experiences often involve significant extra work.

By routinely recognising NHS staff's overseas voluntary activity, managers can reward them for their dedication, communicate the opportunities and encourage greater participation among the workforce, while also highlighting best practices and demonstrating to the organisation the values its staff engaging in international partnerships have.

Examples of recognition can include:

- international volunteer of the year
- international partnership of the year
- annual award ceremonies
- newsletter articles.

Capture innovations and promote sharing upon return

Managers should support and encourage staff to document their learning and capture innovations, alongside their personal experiences, upon their return from an overseas healthcare placement. This enables the effective identification of innovation. It can also help staff to reflect on their experiences so that they can share personal learnings and help inform future engagements by others.

There are several resources available to support the systematic capturing of learning and innovation. Health Education England provides healthcare professionals and employers with a [framework for recording their skills and competencies](#) achieved as part of their international health project and to reflect on how these can be best applied when they return to work.

After an overseas experience, NHS managers can arrange and support formal and informal ways for staff to share their learning with a wider audience. Informally, this could include meetings with colleagues and presentations to teams, while formally it could be presenting at conferences, producing peer-reviewed publications on the innovation they have identified, or presenting to the board.

In addition to local information sharing, it is important that high-impact and well-evidenced frugal innovations are provided with a larger platform to be shared on wider (potentially national) stages. The role of the [Academic Health Science Networks](#) (AHSNs) is key to this process. NHS managers should signpost staff to their local AHSN who will be able to advise on the likely level of interest and support available to evaluate, spread and embed frugal innovations at a regional or national level.

Conclusion

NHS managers have a significant role to play in supporting the effective engagement of their staff in overseas voluntary work in LMICs that not only supports the development of health systems in these countries, but also identifies innovations that can deliver improvements to the NHS.

This may involve:

- coordinating and promoting opportunities
- ensuring staff are appropriately prepared
- building a bank of resources that can help personally and professional support staff to more effectively identify innovative practices in their host country
- instigating systems for both personal development and for the organisation to learn from their experiences.

The THET Innovation Toolkit is a useful resource to help develop and support staff interested in volunteering overseas and sharing what they've learnt personally and professionally.

Resources

THET and Imperial College London, [THET Innovation Toolkit](#)

NHS Employers, [Supporting NHS Staff Who are Volunteers](#)

Health Education England, [Developing People for Health and Healthcare: Toolkit for the Collection of Evidence of Knowledge and Skills Gained through Participation in an International Health Project.](#)

Health Education England, [Health Education England Guidance for Trainees Planning to Volunteer or Work Overseas.](#)

About the NHS Confederation

The NHS Confederation is the membership body brings together and speaks on behalf of organisations that plan, commission and provide NHS services in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. We represent hospitals, community and mental health providers, ambulance trusts, primary care networks, clinical commissioning groups and integrated care systems.

To find out more, visit www.nhsconfed.org



18 Smith Square, Westminster, London SW1P 3HZ

Tel 020 7799 6666

Email enquiries@nhsconfed.org

www.nhsconfed.org

Follow the NHS Confederation on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/nhsconfed) @nhsconfed

If you require this publication in an alternative format, please email enquiries@nhsconfed.org

© NHS Confederation 2020. You may copy or distribute this work, but you must give the author credit, you may not use it for commercial purposes, and you may not alter, transform or build upon this work. Registered Charity no. 1090329