

Practices relying on £800-a-day locum



■ Dr Simon Rudland, a Stowmarket GP and non-executive director of the Suffolk GP Federation, says the recruitment crisis has become a massive issue

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Doctors locum agencies are charging up to £800 per day for cover work in Suffolk after general practices reported a “crisis” in recruitment in the county.

Surgeries in Suffolk have highlighted significant staff shortages as newly-qualified medics choose other lines of health work leaving a void when senior GPs reach retirement age.

The problem is said to be felt most acutely in Ipswich, where many practices have reported long-term vacancies they cannot fill.

But all over the county, there is a growing reliance on locums, which are used to fill the vacuum, despite the large agency fees advertised online at sites such as indeed.co.uk.

Simon Rudland, who is a GP at Stowhealth in Stowmarket, said some of the hourly rates were way above what the smaller practices could afford and had already forced some to close.

“We’ve seen it happen across the country and there are examples of it everywhere,” he added. “It’s a massive issue.”

Dr Rudland said the staffing shortfall started with medical training,

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Dr Simon Rudland,
Suffolk GP Federation

which seemed to favour careers outside of general practice.

The Suffolk GP Federation, for which Dr Rudland is a non-executive director, is trying to challenge that perception, he said, by showing how “fabulous” such careers could be.

“I think we’ve got a strong GP Federation in Suffolk and we’ve got a wonderful opportunity to be addressing the training experience for young doctors who come to the county,” he added.

John Havard, a GP at Saxmundham Health, agreed there was a national “crisis” in recruitment, but suggested it could be alleviated by focusing on how rewarding the “cradle to the grave” aspect of general practice was.

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Demand on recruitment agency doubles

A recruitment agency for the medical profession has reported near double demand for permanent and temporary general practitioners over the past six months.

Michael Sagers, the managing director for Mode Medical Recruitment Ltd, said the shortage of GPs appeared to be due to a lack of graduates and meant there was fierce competition in the industry.

“There are many agencies out there all fighting each

other for the case work, so it does not help matters when there’s a shortage of doctors,” he added.

“Some doctors are asking for astronomical fees because they know they are in demand, although those who want regular work tend to appreciate what’s reasonable and ask for more modest fees.”

Mr Sagers said the market had become “very tight” for permanent staff as well as locum work.

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Suffolk GP Federation chairman Paul Driscoll said another strategy to target the recruitment shortfall was to encourage the more senior doctors to work beyond the minimum retirement age.

Around 40% of Suffolk GPs will reach retirement age in the next five years, but Dr Driscoll says many could be encouraged to stay on part-time if the associated administrative “headaches” were removed.

“I’m particularly interested in that,” he said. “If we can keep them for just a few more years that’s a lot of highly experienced doctors we could be retaining and it would be incredibly helpful in addressing the short term issue.”

Central Suffolk and North Ipswich MP Dan Poulter, who is also a qualified doctor, said Suffolk was “lucky in terms of the quality of GP services provided” and was in a better position than many other counties.

He praised the work of the Suffolk



■ Health minister Dr Dan Poulter MP

GP Federation and also highlighted the 5,000 extra GPs that were being trained nationally between now and 2020, as part of a government initiative, which he said would provide further help.

Andrea Patman, head of primary care (east) at NHS England, which is responsible for commissioning GPs, said: “There is a national shortage of qualified GPs, with more doctors retiring than are completing their training, which has led to challenges around GP recruitment and retention in some city and rural areas.

“There are national plans to address these issues and practices continue to working closely with NHS England, Local Medical Committees and Health Education England to improve access for patients on a local level.

“While we work to address these challenges, it’s important that we employ locums to bridge the gap and ensure that patients can continue to have access to local high-quality GP services.”



doctors to cope with shortage of GPs



■ The recruitment crisis is being felt in practices across the country, and smaller surgeries can't afford expensive locum services

Royal College promotes 'exciting' job

The Royal College of GPs (RCGP) has launched a national campaign aiming to tackle the shortage of medical students specialising in general practice.

In its first ever national recruitment video, the RCGP said it will tackle stereotypes that general practice is less stimulating and exciting than other medical fields.

Just over one seventh of doctors who completed foundation training courses last year chose to become GPs, and the number of unfilled posts rose to almost 8% in 2013, from 2.1% three years previously.

With an ageing and growing population requiring more GP consultations – the RCGP said it wants to raise the profile of general practice in the hope of better recruitment.

RCGP chairwoman

Maureen Baker said there is a "media perception" that GPs have a less exciting job than those in emergency medicine.

"This video – and the GPs who appear in it – show that nothing could be further from the truth," Dr Baker added.

"Being a GP is exciting, varied and challenging, as well as being the only role in the NHS that delivers care for the whole person over their lifetime.

"GPs are now performing procedures every day in our consultation rooms that a decade ago would automatically have been referred to hospital specialists. We hope the video will reach out to the medical students and trainee doctors who are considering the direction of their future careers and show them what a brilliant profession general practice really is."

Recruitment crisis is forcing surgeries to rethink services

All over Suffolk from the small rural practices to large urban surgeries, recruitment is said to be a growing problem.

In Ipswich, where the shortage appears to be the most acute, practice managers have met with Ben Gummer MP to tackle the problem and further meetings have been scheduled with the Suffolk GP Federation.

Gill Lewis, practice manager at Chesterfield Drive surgery in Ipswich, said the demand for doctors outweighed supply and meant practices were having to think of new ways to deliver services in the same way.

"We are having to look at how we are structured to be able to meet demand," she said.

"We're not getting the responses to advertisements and it's a common problem.

"I'm also mindful of the fact that there's the potential that practices could end up paying more than they should in order to attract GPs from other practices, and that's a route we don't want to go down.

"It's a more acute problem for some practices than others. We've not been so badly affected as others, however we will be one less doctor in two months and we don't have a replacement."

Charles Wright, who is a partner at the Framlingham GP practice, said he had been a doctor short for two of the last three years and relied on retired local doctors to fill-in.



■ Ben Gummer MP



■ Medical students are more attracted to other areas of the profession

"We've been reluctant to use agencies," he added.

In Haverhill, Giles Stevens, a GP at the Christmas Maltings and Clements, said there was a "recruitment crisis" nationally, and locally.

"We've tried six times to recruit one position and it's very difficult," he added.

He said the shortages meant GPs regularly worked 13-hour days, which in turn meant the profession appeared less appealing and perpetuated the shortage.

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