



# Evidence of racism on medicine during the 1960s and 1970s

By Janisha Patel  
 Supervisor Hannah Bradby  
 Acknowledgement Lynn Wright and CRER



## Abstract

The increase in Britain's population, the disproportionate growth in the number of places available to medical students and the emigration of British trained doctors created a recruitment gap in the NHS during the 1960s and 1970s. These job openings were most often offered to and occupied by doctors trained in the Commonwealth countries. Due to obvious differences in terms of ethnicity, culture and educational competency there may have been opportunities for racial discrimination against the doctors trained abroad. Newspaper cuttings and other publications from the 1960s and 1970s were analysed for evidence of racial discrimination within the medical profession and towards ethnic minority patients. The review of the articles showed racial discrimination directed to immigrant health professionals and patients, alongside the expression of support in newspapers for ethnic minorities in Britain and concern for their health.



“There was a danger of immigrant groups being used as scapegoats for the problems like urban decay, which existed before they arrived. Britain may be heading towards racial conflicts and blood shed similar to those already experienced in America.” (03.02.71 Daily Telegraph)

“In my own experience quality of service provided by foreign doctors in hospitals was extremely high. Criticisms of staffing inadequacies in casualty departments should have been directed to hospital management boards or to the Government. Individuals doing their best within the framework of limited finances should not have been attacked.” (23.04.71 Daily Telegraph)



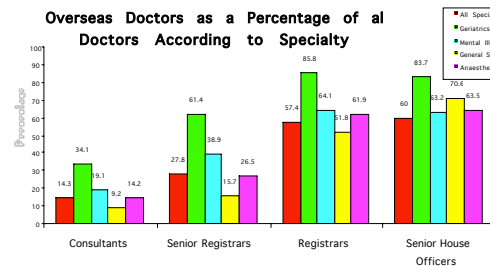
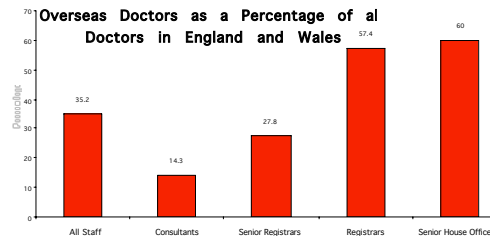
Department of Health and Social Services paper of National Statistics for Hospital Medical Staff in England and Wales in September 30 1975 are represented in the graphs below showing the grades occupied by overseas doctors. (Source: DHSS – Statistics and Research Division)

“...people treated by coloured doctors and nurses are almost unanimous in having no prejudice against them.” (04.03.70 The Sun – The Sun's Race Quiz)

“when doctors employed by hospitals in responsible posts are unable to communicate to their patients or relatives this is no longer human medicine, it is veterinary medicine.” (Seale, 1962, *The supply of doctors and the future of the British medical profession*, London, Fellowship for Freedom in Medicine.)

“In order to keep our casualty department open we have to employ doctors from abroad who are not fit to be left on their own to see and treat cases.” (21.02.69 The Sun)

“Most foreign graduates come to Britain to train for higher qualifications. But most end up in a 'service' post, often working long hours in hospitals with poor postgraduate teaching facilities.” (29.05.72 The Times)



The graphs show that overseas doctors played an essential and central part throughout the UK in hospital grades where they formed over one-third of the total staff. However, their distribution within the grades and specialities was uneven with considerable over-representation in the lower grades and less popular specialities but under-representation in the higher grades and more competitive specialities. (S Sengupta, June 1976 Doctors from Overseas, Community Relations Commission Publication)



**Conclusion**  
 Evidence in newspaper articles, official documents, newsletters and pamphlets suggested overseas trained doctors were more often employed as junior grades and in specialities that were less desirable to British trained doctors. Due to the Commonwealth Act voucher system the majority of overseas doctors were required to leave the UK following the acquisition of their post-graduate qualification and these doctors were not often employed in teaching hospital in their pursuit of this goal. Arguably these overseas doctors were employed under the guise of mutual benefit yet excluded from access to the training system which illustrates the subtle discriminatory practices of the health care system of the era.

Overseas doctors were employed in a large number of hospital vacancies yet were mistrusted as well as being publicly subjected to criticism about their clinical ability and competency by fellow doctors. However, there is less evidence of patients treated by overseas doctors being prejudiced against them, indeed praise for overseas doctors' contribution to the NHS is on record.