
Modern Slavery

House of Commons, Backbench debate
Implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015
Thursday 26th October 2017

About the BMA

The BMA (British Medical Association) is a voluntary professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care.

We welcome this debate as an opportunity for MPs to discuss the impact of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and we urge the Government to support the [Modern Slavery \(Transparency in Supply Chains\) Bill](#) in order to extend the Act's impact on ethical procurement to public bodies.

Key points

- **Labour rights violations in NHS supply chains:** the BMA has long-championed ethical procurement in the NHS, and we believe that all NHS organisations should embed ethical standards into their procurement processes. Our 2016 report, *'In good hands: tackling labour rights concerns in the manufacture of medical gloves'*,¹ highlighted the widespread abuse of labour rights in factories producing medical gloves used in the NHS. We have also previously published several reports on the labour rights violations within the surgical instruments manufacturing industry – our 2014 report uncovered widespread use of child labour, and unfair contractual obligations.²
- **Extending provisions in the Modern Slavery Act:** we welcomed the addition of Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act, which introduced a requirement on commercial organisations to prepare a slavery and human trafficking statement for each financial year. Now, we would like to see public bodies, including health and social care organisations, required to report in the same way – highlighting the actions they have taken to ensure they are operating ethically.

Background

In the UK, the NHS spends in excess of £40 billion per annum on the procurement of goods and services. The supply chains that provide these commodities are global, and employ hundreds of thousands of people worldwide. A substantial proportion of NHS goods are produced in low-middle income countries where working conditions and respect for human rights may not be enforced.

¹ British Medical Association report, 'In good hands; tackling labour rights concerns in the manufacture of medical gloves'. Available at www.bma.org.uk/collective-voice/influence/international-work/fair-medical-trade/medical-gloves-report

² British Medical Association report, 'Healthier Procurement, Improvements to working conditions for surgical instrument manufacture in Pakistan'. Available at www.bma.org.uk/collective-voice/influence/international-work/fair-medical-trade/surgical-tools-report



There is an uncomfortable paradox in providing healthcare in the NHS at the expense of workers' health in supply chains. The BMA believes that the health service has a responsibility to ensure that its practices do not negatively impact on the health and wellbeing of workers globally, and that we lead the way campaigning for ethical procurement. If major manufacturers and suppliers of healthcare products strove to ensure fair and ethical practices in the production of their products, the potential impact on global supply chains would be vast.

Labour rights abuses in NHS supply chains

The BMA has a proven track record of highlighting the abuse of labour rights within NHS supply chains. Most recently, our report, '*In good hands: tackling labour rights concerns in the manufacture of medical gloves*', brought crucial evidence to light regarding the abuse of labour rights within factories producing medical gloves.

The manufacture of medical gloves is a large global industry, producing in the region of 150 billion pairs of gloves per year. Of all disposable gloves, an estimated 85–95 per cent are used in the medical sector – including in the NHS³. Most production is outsourced to factories across Asia, with many employers reliant on migrant workers. There are serious labour rights concerns at many of these factories, including reports of excessive working hours and production targets, inadequate pay, payment of extortionate recruitment fees, and illegal retention of passports.

Extending the Modern Slavery Act: slavery and human trafficking reporting

We believe that *both* commercial organisations and public bodies have a responsibility to outline the steps taken within their organisations to ensure labour rights abuses are not taking place within their supply chains. It should be a requirement across the board to provide information regarding the effectiveness of organisational policies to tackle modern slavery.

We welcomed the addition of Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which paved the way by introducing a requirement on commercial organisations to prepare a slavery and human trafficking statement for each financial year.⁴ However, we believe the law should go one step further and also require *public bodies* to include a statement on slavery and human trafficking in their annual report and accounts.

NHS foundation trusts and NHS trusts that purchase medical goods are currently required to comply with the Modern Slavery Act, as they are established as corporate bodies under the NHS Act 2006. However, this is not explicitly stated in the Act, or its guidance, and to date only a handful of NHS trusts have prepared a slavery and human trafficking statement. Furthermore, there are many parts of the health and care system that are not captured under the Modern Slavery Act, as it currently stands, and we would like to see the same standards applied across the board.

We welcome the impact that the Modern Slavery Act has had thus far in tackling slavery in supply chains, and we urge MPs to take this a step further and support the [Modern Slavery \(Transparency in Supply Chains\) Bill](#). This Bill would extend the requirements of Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act to public bodies – including all health and social care organisations.

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³ Yap J. Sector update: rubber gloves. Kuala Lumpur: OSK Research, 2010.

⁴ Read the BMA's own 'slavery and human trafficking statement' here: www.bma.org.uk/-/media/files/pdfs/about%20the%20bma/legal%20policies/bma-modern-slavery-statement-may2017.pdf?la=en