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Britain is recruiting GPs from the EU and beyond | Oli Scarff/AFP via Getty Images

Training Britain's doctors — in Poland

European firms train doctors on British medical practices, language and culture.

By **JO HARPER** | 5/10/19, 2:17 PM CET | Updated 5/15/19, 4:29 AM CET

WARSAW, Poland — Brexit uncertainty isn't stopping the U.K.'s National Health Service from hiring doctors from beyond its borders — including from the ^{FTI}

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Enter firms like Paragona, which calls itself "the leading global provider of international solutions to staff shortage problems for the healthcare sector." The Polish company won a contract with the NHS a few weeks ago as part of the health service's "international GP recruitment program," and is training its first batch of 100 EU doctors to practice in England.

The general practitioners, who come from Spain, Lithuania, Greece and Poland, are enrolled at a campus in the small town of Piaseczno, 20 kilometers south of Warsaw.

"We provide EU GPs with a 12-20 week residential course in Poland and when in the U.K., the doctors undergo additional training under the supervision of a mentor," Paragona Board Chairman Adam Ringer said.

The training is intensive, with five-day, 40 hour-per-week courses that include simulated surgeries, language courses and classes on British culture.

“Whatever happens in relation to Brexit, the NHS will continue to need excellent doctors from all over Europe” — *Rachel Souter, head of international recruitment at NHS England*

Conor Crowley, a teacher at the campus, highlighted how this is done. "In Leicestershire, for example, there is a different word for 'cabbage,' and 200 local words, which a foreign GP will not be expected to know, but to be aware of," he said. "Slavic culture is a bit more direct than the Brits tend to be."

Doctors are also made to watch classic British soap operas such as "Emmerdale" and "Coronation Street."

The NHS has decided to throw (Brexit) caution to the wind because of an acute staffing crisis.

While it is Europe's biggest employer — with a workforce of 1.1 million — 100,000 jobs are unfilled, 7,000 of them family doctor positions. The latest statistics show the health service had the equivalent of 28,596 fully qualified GPs working in England in December 2018 — 593 fewer than 12 months earlier.

This has had a negative effect on patient care, as well as the wellbeing of medical professionals. "Unfortunately, while workload in general practice is soaring we are hemorrhaging family doctors from the NHS," Helen Stokes-Lampard, chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), said.

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There aren't enough British doctors to fill the gap, leading the NHS to launch its international recruitment scheme, a £100 million plan that launched in 2016 to find 500 family doctors from abroad to work in England by 2020. This target was increased to 2,000 in 2017. Eight companies are part of the agreement, with most based in the U.K.

The initial focus has been on GPs from the European Economic Area, and Paragona is doing its best to attract doctors from across the Continent.

“During the course we provide accommodation, meals, sports activities, and grant scholarships for families,” Kinga Łozińska, Paragona Polska CEO, said. The company also helps GPs with resettlement, finding a school and opening a bank account when they get to the U.K.

However, none of the doctors enrolled wanted to talk about the course.

“The GPs are a bit nervous about Brexit. But we have written confirmation from the head of the NHS England recruitment service, guaranteeing the job,” Paragona Chairman Ringer said.

The company even displays the letter from the NHS, dated March 13, on its website. “I would like to assure all general practitioners from other European countries who are welcome and that the terms, conditions of the offer and the employment contract they sign will not be broken or changed to their disadvantage,” wrote Rachel Souter, head of international recruitment at NHS England.

“Whatever happens in relation to Brexit, the NHS will continue to need excellent doctors from all over Europe.”

In February, the NHS pledged to extend the scheme for “the duration of the five-year period 2019/20-2023/24.” It also expanded its recruitment range to include Australia and other non-EEA countries, GPOnline reported.

“The NHS long-term plan has aspirations that will be great for patient care, but if these are to be realized we need an expanded workforce to deliver it — and the international recruitment scheme is an important element of building the GP workforce,” Stokes-Lampard said.

“I think that the U.K. as a traditionally multicultural and multinational country will cope with this problem. Nevertheless, our project has particularly strong safeguards” — *Kinga Łozińska, Paragona Polska CEO*



The decision to extend the scheme has come despite question marks over its effectiveness — in June last year, GPOnline reported that NHS figures show only 58 doctors had joined the general practitioner workforce through the program. A report by the Royal College of General Practitioners last summer voiced doubts over the scheme and called for a review.

Others warn of short-termism. “Schemes like this should not be relied on as the magical solution to the recruitment crisis as Britain becomes a less appealing place for EU doctors to come and work,” Krishna Kasaraneni, the British Medical Association's national GP contract negotiator, said.

However, the officials at Paragona remain optimistic despite the U.K.'s imminent departure from the EU, and the continuing uncertainty over whether EU citizens will be welcomed into the British workforce post Brexit.

“I think that the U.K. as a traditionally multicultural and multinational country will cope with this problem. Nevertheless, our project has particularly strong safeguards,” Paragona CEO Łozińska said.

“They [European doctors] will be able to work in the structures of the NHS regardless of the form of Brexit.”