

Helping you to help them

A Department of Health-funded scheme is helping doctors to travel to developing countries and train local clinicians to improve healthcare. John Weaver hears how a project to tackle Pakistan's high maternal and under-fives mortality rates is faring

PAKISTAN'S MORTALITY rate for under-fives is 32 times that of the UK and its maternal mortality rate is 68 times higher. But, undaunted, doctors from England are using their skills to try to reverse this with the help of Department of Health-funded grants.

NHS staff are being encouraged to apply for the second wave of grants under the £20,000 Humanitarian Fund, which is run by the BMA, the Royal College of Nursing and the DoH. Multidisciplinary teams of healthcare workers can apply to the fund, launched last year, for up to £2,000.

Last year the scheme helped teams from across England share expertise and provide healthcare in the heart of communities suffering from intense poverty and post-war devastation. One of the grant winners was Child Advocacy International, awarded funding to support the Emergency Maternal and Child Healthcare project. Advanced Life Support Group is also involved in the scheme.

The overall objective is not only to establish a programme of continuing education and support for healthcare professionals but also to ensure that essential drugs and equipment are provided and maintained in a sustainable way.

Berkshire A&E consultant Alison Gammon was a member of the team which visited Pakistan in May this year. She says that if deaths and disability are to be avoided, the management of obstetric, neonatal and paediatric emergencies must be coordinated and effective. Care delivered in the first few hours of presentation is vital, and training in these specific areas formed a major component of the scheme.

This was delivered at two levels. The first focused on specialists and senior training grade clinicians, with the aim of establishing a national training faculty for local healthcare workers. The second was based in the districts, identifying

trainers to develop different levels of training to meet the needs and capabilities of the local healthcare community.

Another important aspect of the project is to ensure that healthcare facilities have the resources and continuing commitment from the government and international community to enable them to continue the level of care being taught. Ultimately the aim is to reduce infant and maternal mortality.

Dr Gammon says it is too early formally to evaluate the project but she says the team is pleased about how the training is taking off and being cascaded down.

She is returning to Pakistan in December for a two-week stint of teaching sessions in different parts of the country and says she is likely to go back once a year.

Dr Gammon encourages other doctors to apply for grants. 'The Humanitarian Fund grant was very useful,' she says. 'It helped get things off the ground. Just getting a fare was expensive and we had a lot of equipment. One of the most rewarding aspects was realising that we were teaching skills to a motivated group of clinicians who could have a major impact on the health of the vulnerable members of their community — an opportunity seldom available in the UK.'

She adds that the World Health Organisation and UNICEF have agreed to support the project. The aim is to implement the programme in other developing countries.

BMA international committee chairman Edwin Borman welcomes the cash input from the DoH and encourages doctors to apply for grants.

'The BMA knows that many doctors are giving their spare time to help colleagues or to offer their expertise in developing countries, and is looking to the programme to support them,' he says.

'Doctors working in developing countries can learn useful lessons that can be applied in the UK.'

Other first-wave projects include a team from Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, aiming to implement a diagnostic ultrasound service in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a project to train healthcare workers in HIV prevention and treatment, and prevention of accidental infection from bloodborne viruses, in Ethiopia.

● To apply for a grant from the Humanitarian Fund applicants must be working for the NHS in England. Grants are designed to cover supplementary costs such as travelling expenses or accommodation. Application forms can be obtained by emailing internationalinfo@bma.org.uk or from www.bma.org.uk