



BRITISH ISLAMIC  
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION  
[www.britishima.org](http://www.britishima.org)

# THEATRE HIJAB TOOLKIT

*ENSURING EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY*  
GUIDANCE FOR FEMALE MUSLIM HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS



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# INTRODUCTION

## *Background*

Women are under-represented in surgery, despite making up the majority of trainee junior doctors<sup>1</sup>. Work by the Royal College of Surgeons is addressing this shortfall, however barriers to surgical career progression need to be examined and challenged if this issue is to be tackled fully.


One possible barrier for practising Muslim trainees who wish to observe religious headscarves (hijab\*) is theatre dress code. Whilst some Muslim women have successfully combined surgical training and observance of hijab, the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA) has been informed of numerous cases where a lack of flexibility or the perception thereof has limited access to training and career opportunities. One trainee had wanted to specialise in Obstetrics and Gynaecology but in view of concerns around dress codes had switched career plans to General Practice. Others knew of Muslim women who felt it would be easier to remove their headscarves permanently rather than speak up about the issue.

This is wholly unsatisfactory and BIMA believes Muslim women should have equal opportunities and choices, independent of faith.

The Equality Act of 2010, requires public bodies to take a proactive approach to equality and diversity<sup>2</sup>. An Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment in 2010<sup>3</sup>, found that “some staff had had such difficulty with those dress code provision as to find that they could no longer continue in their jobs”.

1. UK Foundation Programme Office. Foundation programme annual report, 2013 [www.foundationprogramme.nhs.uk/download.asp?file=UK\\_Foundation\\_Programme\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2013\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.foundationprogramme.nhs.uk/download.asp?file=UK_Foundation_Programme_Annual_Report_2013_FINAL.pdf)
2. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>
3. Department of Health. *Equality Impact Assessment, Uniforms and Workwear: Guidance on uniform and workwear policies for NHS employers*, 13712. London: DoH; 2010. Page 3 Available at [Http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics/publications/publicationspolicyandguidance/DH\\_114751](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics/publications/publicationspolicyandguidance/DH_114751). [Accessed 25/12/14]

\* Please note that the word '*hijab*' can encompass all aspects of a Muslims woman's dress, modesty and manner. However in this document it is used interchangeably with headscarf and denotes Islamic head coverings for Muslim women.



It has also been British Medical Association (BMA) policy since 2005 to “campaign for developments to facilitate religious practises” including, as an example, “provision of materials to form a ‘theatre hijab’”<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, in April 2015 another motion was passed in the BMA Annual Medical Students’ Conference calling for there to be “published national standards and NHS trust guidelines on religious theatre uniform including authorized variations in dress code.”

In 2014, Vascular surgeons Samina Ali and Virginia Bowbrick published an article in *BMJ Careers*<sup>5</sup> highlighting this issue. Their article ‘Supporting Diversity in Surgical Careers: flexibility in theatre uniforms’ affirms that there is institutional support for Equality and Diversity dress code flexibility at Department of Health and College level (Royal College of Surgeons).

Through a Freedom of Information request to 50 trusts, they also ascertained that trusts are formally open to considering and accommodating concerns, although there is considerable local variation in practice and this is not often formally written into local dress code policy. If Muslim healthcare providers were more aware of these options then barriers to career progression could be prevented.

BIMA supports the development of national and local detailed guidance on this important issue. In the interim we call upon Muslim female healthcare providers to begin these conversations locally in order to explore options and update dress code policies. This ‘toolkit’ offers guidance on how to begin. Whilst the focus of research so far has been on doctors, this guidance is applicable to any healthcare profession affected independent of discipline.

4. BMA. *BMA Policy Book 2014-15*. 2014:79. Available at <http://bma.org.uk/-/media/files/pdfs/about%20the%20bma/bma%20policy%20book%202014-15.pdf>. [Accessed 25/12/14]
5. Ali, S. & Bowbrick, V. *Supporting diversity in surgical careers: flexibility in theatre uniforms*. *BMJ Careers*. 2014. Available at <http://careers.bmj.com/careers/advice/view-article.html?id=20016322> . [Accessed 18/3/2015]

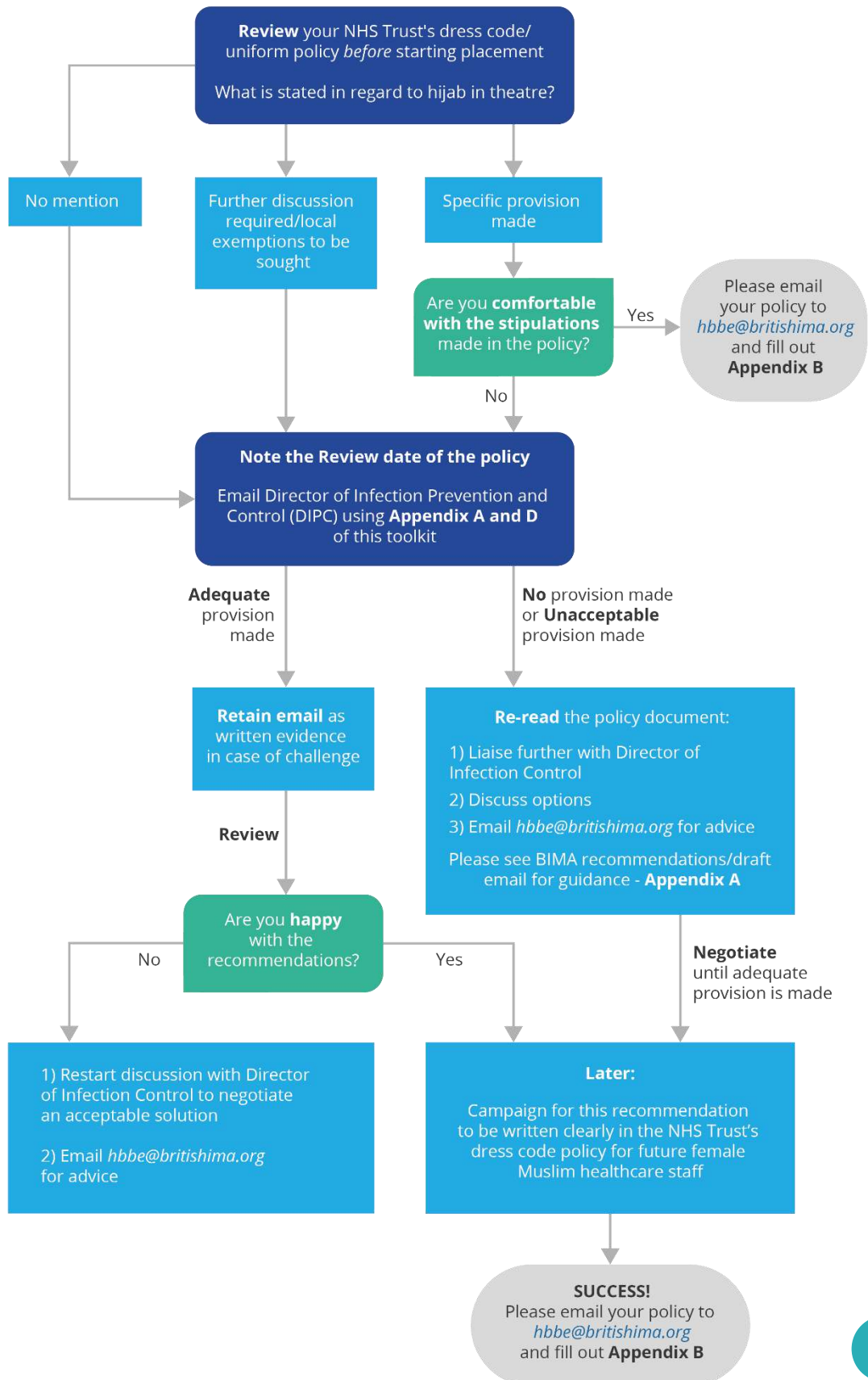


# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDANCE

- The flowchart on the following page gives you a step-by-step overview on how to tackle this issue.
- The appendices made reference to are found at the end of the toolkit.
- Please note that the contents page is hyperlinked- you can quickly move to the relevant section by pressing control and clicking on the title.
- We greatly appreciate feedback as to how this toolkit can be improved, so please email us at [hbbe@britishima.org](mailto:hbbe@britishima.org).
- We are also keen to hear your stories and view your policies, including how these were potentially changed for the better! So please fill in Appendix B so that your experience can benefit others.

# FLOWCHART

## Suggested Theatre Hijab Handling Process





# APPENDIX A

## *Acceptable Headscarf Solutions*

- Many trusts prefer to advise staff bring in their own freshly washed cotton headscarf for each theatre attendance that is subsequently washed at 60°C. This may be worn with or without an additional theatre cap.
- Some theatres stock orthopaedic hoods which cover the head as well as neck. However people may find they are not as fully covering, especially of the chest as they would like.
- The BIMA Theatre Hijab and BBE team would like to see a future in which purpose made disposable single use theatre hijabs become widely available. Some trusts do offer this option but it is not available yet nationally.

# APPENDIX B

## *Trust Policy Feedback*

Please fill in this form and email us [hbbe@britishima.org](mailto:hbbe@britishima.org), with your Trust's dress code policy attached!

1) Name: \_\_\_\_\_

2) Specialty/Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

3) Hospital Trust: \_\_\_\_\_

4) Dress Code Policy attached:      Yes       No

5) What adequate provisions were given?

\_\_\_\_\_

6) Please give details of:

- Material: \_\_\_\_\_

- Colours: \_\_\_\_\_

- Disposable or reusable: \_\_\_\_\_

- Size: \_\_\_\_\_

- Product information / code / link if possible:

\_\_\_\_\_

- Where they were provided, or did you bring your own in?

\_\_\_\_\_

- Other features: \_\_\_\_\_

7) Did you find this flowchart useful?      Yes       No

8) Please tell us about your experiences in following this pathway

- Positive experiences:

\_\_\_\_\_

- Negative experiences:

\_\_\_\_\_

- Suggestions for improvement:

\_\_\_\_\_



# APPENDIX C

## *Email Advice*

Pointers for emailing Director of Infection Prevention and Control:

Mention...

- Introduce yourself and the reason for emailing.
- Mention you have reviewed the trust uniform policy.
- Explain there is no specific guidance on what a Muslim woman should do with regards to her headscarf in theatre.
- Briefly explain the religious requirement for hijab.
- Propose options for what can be done to address this gap. (See Appendix A)

A sample letter is available on the next page (Appendix D).

## *Further evidence if you feel it is needed:*

*“Some women may be deterred from pursuing surgical careers because theatre uniforms go against their religious dress codes. Samina Ali and Virginia Bowbrick look at how flexibility in theatre scrubs can support Muslim women who wear the hijab and abaya, and how greater awareness of the provisions available could help to support diversity in surgical careers.”*

Ali, S. & Bowbrick, V. Supporting diversity in surgical careers: flexibility in theatre uniforms. BMJ Careers. 2014. Available at <http://careers.bmj.com/careers/advice/view-article.html?id=20016322>. [Accessed 18/3/2015]

*“It has also been BMA policy since 2005 to “campaign for developments to facilitate religious practises” including, as an example, “provision of materials to form a “theatre hijab.”*

BMA. BMA Policy Book 2014-15. 2014:79. Available at <http://bma.org.uk/-/media/files/pdfs/about%20the%20bma/bma%20policy%20book%202014-15.pdf>

# APPENDIX D

## Sample Email/Letter

The following is a sample letter to your director of Infection Prevention and Control for you to edit or enhance as appropriate.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

*I am a [insert grade] [insert profession/specialty] at the [insert university/deanery]. For my [first rotation/attachment] this [year, month, etc.] I have the pleasure of being assigned to [insert trust name here].*

*I have read the current Uniform and Dress Code Policy for [insert trust name here & document code] and it does not appear that there is any specific guidance on the wearing of headscarves in theatre. As a practising Muslim woman it is a Requirement that hair and neck be covered in public at all times and so I am keen to come to a safe and acceptable solution in advance.*

*Possible solutions that have worked at other NHS Trusts:*

- A. Women bring in their own dedicated theatre headscarf which they wear for that day only and which is washed at 600°C after.*
- B. Orthopaedic hoods may be used however these need to be opaque and cover the neck.*
- C. We could look at sourcing a disposable bespoke theatre hijab (we know of a supplier that does this).*

*Please would you advise how to proceed. Could we look at getting some more specific direction on this in our trust policy?*

*Thank you very much for your time.*

*Best wishes & Yours sincerely,*

*Dr/Miss/Ms/Mr \_\_\_\_\_*

*[Grade, specialty]  
[Deanery/Uni]  
e: [insert email address]*

# APPENDIX E

## *Theatre Headscarf in Trust Dress Codes Survey*

BIMA conducted a survey of 33 trusts across the UK to identify those whose dress code policies mention the issue of headscarf in theatre. The results of these can be seen below.

<i>No Guidance</i>	<i>Not Permissible</i>	<i>Permissible</i>
Brighton and Sussex	Isle of Wight	Burton**
Central Manchester		Sheffield*
Dartford and Gravesham		Worcestershire**
Derby		
Doncaster and Bassetlaw		
East Cheshire		
East London		
Gloucestershire		
Heart of England		
Kettering		
Leicester		
Mid Essex		
Norfolk & Norwich		
North East London		
Northampton		
Northumberland		
Nottingham		
Peterborough		
Plymouth		
Portsmouth		
Queen Victoria		
Royal United Hospitals Bath		
South Manchester		
St Helens and Knowsley		
Surrey and Sussex		
Tees and North East Yorkshire		
UCL		
United Lincolnshire		
University Hospital Southampton		

\* Must be disposable if scrubbed to perform or assist

\*\* Practicalities of this need to be reviewed for doctors at those trusts



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