

Barts and London NHS Trust has hired debt collectors to recover nearly £1m in overpayments from 248 of its employees, an investigation by the Health Service Journal found.

According to the NHS Trust, salary overpayments in the last financial year totalled £995,000, or 0.25% of its total salary bill of £393m.

It said that overpayments occurred when a change in an individual's circumstances, such as a reduction in hours worked, was not reported to its payroll department in time to meet the processing deadline.

Peter Carter, chief executive of the Royal College of Nursing, said: "It gives the NHS a bad name and points to a wider malaise.

"Nurses don't get the same pay cheque every month. If you work weekends or nights you get different rates of pay, so a variation of a few pounds would not necessarily be that obvious."

He added: "The trust should make it clear to the individual and say what is the most sensible way to repay this. Debt collectors are highly inappropriate."

Payroll system

The trust revealed that it is currently piloting a new electronic system that will allow managers to provide payroll with more up-to-date information.

It said: "We rigorously pursue all salary overpayments and are confident that this new additional measure will help further to avoid their occurrence in the first place."

The majority of the amount overpaid has either been recovered or accounted for, but £275,580, or 27% of the total, remains outstanding and is being "actively pursued".

The recovery of overpayments is a matter that should be approached with sensitivity," said David Hodge, head of employment law at Brethertons. "Inappropriate or disproportionate recovery procedures could, in certain circumstances, undermine the implied duty of trust and confidence between employer and employee, leading to claims of constructive unfair dismissal.

"Further, there are significant reputational issues at stake if a heavy-handed approach is adopted following what was, after all, the employer's mistake."