# **Health workers’ unions call for Frank Hester to lose NHS contracts**

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BMA says Tory donor should resign from his company as questions grow about how many times Hester has met Sunak

Unions representing GPs and health workers have called on the Conservative donor [Frank Hester](https://www.theguardian.com/business/frank-hester) to stand down from running NHS contracts, saying his “racist and misogynistic comments” breach its fit and proper person test.

Hester’s company TPP runs the electronic patient records of almost half the medical practices in the UK. His remarks about Diane Abbott have prompted calls for him to step aside amid a growing political row.

Downing Street refused to say how many times the prime minister has met the Conservative donor since he gave the party £10m.

The pair are believed to have met in the afternoon on the day after the autumn statement in November when Hester paid about £16,000 in travel costs for Sunak to fly to Leeds by helicopter for a political visit. Downing Street declined to “get into the details” of whether they met.

The Guardian can also reveal the pair were photographed together at a party fundraiser in June last year.

It is understood the health tech entrepreneur attended at least two party events in London: the Conservatives’ main summer party in central London last June, where they were photographed, and another just two weeks ago.

Hester, who has worked on artificial intelligence as part of his IT business, has previously said he has had “some quite long conversations with Rishi about AI”.

He also tweeted about witnessing a “brilliant AI discussion between Rishi Sunak and Elon Musk” in November last year.

Anneliese Dodds, Labour’s chair, said Sunak must be clear about their relationship.

“Rishi Sunak has shown he is just too weak to pay back his millions and cut ties completely. Rishi Sunak needs to come clean about the relationship he has with Frank Hester, including how many times he has met with him since becoming prime minister.”

The NHS’s fit and proper person test applies to the leadership of trusts but accompanying notes suggest that other bodies “may also want to follow this guidance as a matter of good practice”. Among the minimum expectations is the avoidance of discrimination as set out in the Equality Act 2010.

The Guardian revealed on Monday that at a meeting in 2019, Hester said seeing Abbott on TV made [“you want to hate all black women”](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/mar/11/biggest-tory-donor-looking-diane-abbott-hate-all-black-women) and that the long-serving MP “should be shot”. He has apologised for the remarks but denied they were motivated by race or gender.

On Thursday the British Medical Association’s general practitioners’ committee (GPC), which represent all UK GPs, voted in favour of an emergency motion that said Hester’s comments “contravened NHS England’s fit and proper person test framework introduced in response to the [2019 Kark review](https://minhalexander.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/kark-fppr-review-report-6.02.2019-.pdf) recommendations”.

The motion called on “UK health boards to apply their own processes vigilantly when contracting external stakeholders whose views and values may not align with the wider professional NHS workforce”. It said he should resign from his company with immediate effect.

After the meeting, Dr Alan Stout and Dr Andrew Buist, co-chairs of the GPC, said: “This emergency motion makes clear how appalled GPs are. There is no room for racism or sexism in the NHS, and the committee believes he should resign his position with immediate effect.”

TPP did not respond to a request for comment.

Dr Steve Taylor, a spokesperson for the GP committee of the Doctors’ Association UK, also backed the GPC motion.

He said: “Doctors’ Association UK GP committee have significant concerns over the recent comments reportedly made by Frank Hester, owner of TPP, one of the major suppliers of GP IT systems. The GP workforce is a diverse community of people and these comments are deeply upsetting. We agree with other GP bodies that it calls into question the leadership of TPP.”

TPP has received more than £400m in contracts from the NHS and other government bodies since 2016.

Christina McAnea, the general secretary of Unison, which represents half a million NHS workers, echoed the views of the doctors’ body.

She said: “The abusive comments levelled at Diane Abbott were appalling. People rightly expect that companies providing public services aren’t headed by individuals with racist views.”

Hester has given at least £10m to the Conservatives, making him the party’s largest donor. He is also reported to have donated a further £5m earlier this year.

Sunak is under increasing pressure to [return the money](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/mar/14/tories-urged-return-further-5m-donation-frank-hester) after the disclosure of Hester’s remarks, amid wider unrest about his leadership. On Friday night it was reported that MPs on the right of the the Conservative party had held talks with moderates about uniting behind [Penny Mordaunt](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/penny-mordaunt) to replace him.

“The mood has shifted a long way this week,’ a source told the Daily Mail. “There is a feeling that we cannot go on as we are and that even Penny would be better.”

Rachel Harrison, the national secretary of the GMB, whose members include nurses and ambulance drivers, said there should be a pause on granting any further contracts to Hester’s company.

She said: “The Hester affair is just another example of a rotten Conservative government failing the country at every turn.

“The public should expect the highest standards from public sector suppliers, and it’s time to call a halt on the money-go-round from public contracts straight into the Tory party’s coffers. There should be a moratorium on new NHS contracts while he is negotiating a new £5m donation to the Conservatives – it’s a clear conflict of interest.”

When the £5m donation was announced this month, Hester rejected the idea that he was giving money to secure more government contracts, saying many came from hospitals and GPs. “GPs decide which software they’re using, not Rishi Sunak,” he said.

A [petition calling for Hester to be stripped of the OBE](https://act.38degrees.org.uk/act/hester-tory-obe-petition) he was awarded in 2015 for services to healthcare has 89,000 signatures.

Among those supporting the demand is Dorothy Price, a professor of history of art at the University of Bristol, where she was a founder member and the inaugural director of the centre for black humanities.

Price tweeted: “Frank Hester has made vile comments about Diane Abbott. He doesn’t deserve to be honoured, but holds an OBE. Agree? Sign the petition demanding his OBE be stripped from him now!”

The leaders of 10 prominent anti-racism groups [have written to Sunak](https://leejasper.blogspot.com/2024/03/supporting-diane-abbot-mp-national.html) about Hester’s remarks, calling on the prime minister to “unequivocally commit to fighting racism”.

They said “an increasingly normalised culture of racism that has been allowed to fester under the current administration” meant Hester “felt emboldened to express vile sentiments”.

The letter – signed by David Weaver, the chair of Operation Black Vote; Shabna Begum, the chief executive of the Runnymede Trust; Timi Okuwa of the Black Equity Organisation; Jeremy Crook of Action for Race Equality; and Zara Mohammed, secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain – urged Sunak to take “immediate and tangible steps to address this situation”.

They said: “We would invite you to take this opportunity to champion the cause of anti-racism and to lead by example, demonstrating that the UK government is unequivocally committed to fighting racism and fostering a society where equality, respect and inclusivity are paramount.”