

RCGP Briefing: Debate on Visas for International Doctors

October 2022

This issue

General Practice is facing a workforce crisis. We have a falling number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) GPs looking after an increasing number of patients with ever more complex needs. On average in England, as of July 2022, GPs look after 2,247 patients - 16% more patients than in 2015.

Over 40% of all trainee GPs are International Medical Graduates (IMGs). If we are serious about meeting the Government's 6,000 additional GP target in England and meet the demand across the devolved nations, we need as many of these trainees as possible, to remain in the UK and work as qualified GPs.

The NHS invests significant resources into training these doctors, both in terms of funding (GP training costs approximately £50,000 per trainee per year), and in terms of trainer time and expertise. In return, IMGs make invaluable contributions to the NHS.

Once they complete their training, most of these IMGs will need to find a practice to sponsor their visa, or they will be forced to leave the country. This is because GP training takes three years to complete, and it is only after five years that IMGs can apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain. This problem is unique to general practice as other medical specialty training takes a minimum of five years to complete.

What we are hearing from our members

We have heard from our members that many IMGs find the process of getting a visa stressful and are anxious that they may be forced to leave the country. From our survey of International Medical Graduates across the UK, we found of those that who responded:

Around half (49%) of all IMG trainees have difficulties with the visa process

Around 30% of all IMG trainees consider not working as an NHS GP because of difficulties with the visa process

17% are considering leaving the UK entirely

If these figures are representative, that would mean there are 1,165 potential GPs who are in danger of being lost to NHS general practice.

This month, RCGP Chair Martin Marshall and Vice Chair Margaret Ikpoh wrote to the UK Home Secretary, calling for a national solution to address this matter with urgency. **4,367 GPs** joined us in adding their names to our letter to put further pressure on the government to take action and this was covered in the Times. Alongside the letter, we shared a report with the Home Secretary titled [Fit for the future: Opening the door to international GPs](#) which contains testimonies of GP trainees and employers about how this issue is impacting on their lives and careers.

We need these international graduates more than ever and any visa issues that drive them away must be dealt with as a matter of priority.

What can be done?

The RCGP has taken several practical steps, working with NHS bodies throughout the four UK nations, to help GPs from other countries to get visas and the support they need to settle in the UK.

We have developed dedicated advice and guidance to support our members in obtaining a visa. Furthermore, we are working closely with the NHS to deliver a series of events that provide further support to both trainees and practices wishing to navigate the visa process.

There are, however, 8,166 GP practices in the UK. For them all to become visa sponsors it will cost the NHS over £4 million. The process takes up to eight weeks and we have heard from some practices that it can take much longer. Most practices will only start the process when they know they have an IMG they want to recruit. This wait can cause significant stress and anxiety for IMGs. Usually, an IMG needs a new, sponsored visa very soon after finishing their training, and this means there can be very tight timelines involved in completing the process of becoming a sponsor and subsequently the IMG applying for a visa.

The response we have heard from IMGs and employers shows that although the actions we have taken have helped; this is a problem that can't be solved by piecemeal actions alone. Encouraging more practices to become sponsors will help, but what we really need is action by the Home Office to completely remove the stress and anxiety that too many IMGs face. That is why 4,353 GPs have signed our letter asking the Home Secretary to take action.

To solve this problem the Home Secretary could choose one of the following options:

Offer IMGs the opportunity to apply for indefinite leave to remain in the UK on successful completion of GP specialty training.

Create a new Post Medical Training Visa which would allow trainees to stay in the

Work with the NHS bodies in each of the four nations to create overarching

EITHER of the above options would remove most of the problems highlighted in this report, cut unnecessary bureaucracy, and help the Government hit its target of an additional 6,000 GPs working in the NHS in England.

We are calling for this change as part of our [Fit for the Future campaign](#) which sets out the need for a wider recruitment and retention strategy that will go beyond the target of 6000 more GPs, backed by a £150 million annual GP retention fund and an increase in the number of GP training places by at least 10% year on year.