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Dear Home Secretary,

Congratulations on your appointment as Home Secretary. We are writing to you as Chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and as co Chairs of the RCGP Registrars Committee to ask to meet to discuss how to address the barriers that GPs are experiencing securing visas to enable them to work for the NHS in the UK, and how the planned reforms to immigration policy could either solve or exacerbate these problems.

While the Government has committed to a long-term plan to expand medical school places and rely less on immigration, in the short to medium term the NHS would fall apart without GPs who are originally from outside the UK.

Currently over half of all GP Registrars are international medical school graduates (IMGs) and unlike in other medical specialities they will complete training in three years rather than five or more, so will not be eligible to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain when they qualify. This group of GPs will deliver an incredible amount of care for our patients and are vital to realising the Government's recently published 10 Year Health Plan for the NHS, given its commitments to train thousands more GPs and transfer more care from hospitals to the community.

We estimate that this year around 1,600 newly qualified GPs will need a visa this year¹. Our recent survey of 493 general practice managers however, found that only 29% of practices currently offer visa sponsorships.

A recent survey conducted jointly by our GP registrar community group and the BMA GP registrar committee further identified a clear need for system reform. The key findings based on responses from 521 GPs and registrars who either need, or have recently secured, a visa to work in the UK were:

- **71%** said finding a job which would sponsor their visa was difficult or very difficult.
- **44%** found the visa application process and associated paperwork difficult or very difficult.
- **61%** said that if their difficulty finding a GP job due to visa issues continues (or had continued) they would plan to leave the country.

The planned immigration reforms, depending on the course taken, could either make these problems much worse or help solve them.

Current proposals to increase the Immigration Skills Charge (ISC), which GP practices must pay to hire international staff, by 32% would have a severe impact on general practice. This would be compounded by proposals to double the time required for applicants to gain Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) as practices would have to pay the ISC for longer. This will cost practices thousands more for every international GP they hire. Together these changes are likely to make it much harder for the NHS to recruit and retain the GPs needed to fulfil the NHS 10 Year Health Plan.

To tackle these problems, we need the immigration reforms to include special considerations for GPs. While we welcomed the visa extension that allows GPs to remain in the UK for an additional four-months beyond qualification, our survey results make it clear that this has not been sufficient to address the challenges faced by IMGs. We have called on previous Home Secretaries to consider the following options but have been disappointed to see little progress made:

- Offer IMGs the opportunity to apply for indefinite leave to remain in the UK on successful completion of GP specialty training.
- Work with the NHS bodies in each of the four nations to create overarching umbrella bodies who can act as sponsors for all IMGs.

Either of these options would provide a positive solution for IMG GPs and ensure the NHS is able to recruit and employ much needed GPs.

In addition, the proposal in the Immigration White Paper to grant 'earned settlement' more quickly via demonstrating "points-based contributions to the UK economy and society" is an opportunity to recognise the value that international GPs bring to the UK. We understand that the Government will be consulting on the criteria for 'earned settlement' later this year and hope that consideration will be given to including IMG GPs within this. Once someone completes post-graduate medical training in the UK, they should be able to take up a much-needed role in the NHS without having to grapple with complex visa requirements.

Enabling GPs to apply for ILR after they complete their UK training via the 'earned settlement' route proposed in the White Paper would make a significant contribution to helping the Government meet its promise to train thousands more GPs and transfer more care into the community. They are a real asset to the communities they work in. Training GPs who then have to leave the country because they cannot find work that offers visa sponsorship would be a major waste of public money.

We would be grateful if you were able to meet with us to discuss how immigration and health policy can be aligned to meet your cross-governmental objectives.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Kamila Hawthorne MBE
Chair of Council
Royal College of General Practitioners

Dr Deepthi Lavu
GP Registrar Co-Chair

Dr Akram Hussain
GP Registrar Co-Chair

ⁱ This is based on our projection of around 4,200 GPs expected to CCT this year and our latest survey, finding nearly 4 in 10 GP Registrars required a visa sponsorship to work in the UK.