

Text of the letter sent to the Home Secretary:

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Dear Secretary of State

Re: Visas for international doctors to work for the NHS after completing GP training in the UK

As you will know, general practice is working under intense workload and workforce pressures. To meet this growing demand, it is vital to increase the size of the general practice workforce, including delivering government targets to recruit an additional 6,000 GPs in England, and pledges across the UK to increase the GP workforce.

To meet these targets, we need to train more GPs, and recent years have seen significant progress on this front. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of doctors accepted to GP training programmes in England rose from 2,769 to 3,793, and we have seen increases across the UK. This success has depended heavily on international medical graduates (IMGs) - doctors who have completed medical degrees overseas - with IMGs making up 47% of new trainees in England in 2021/22. The NHS invests significant resources into training these doctors as GPs, both in terms of funding (GP training costs approximately £50,000 per student per year), and in terms of trainer time and expertise. In return, IMGs make invaluable contributions to the NHS. IMGs are especially likely to work in areas with fewer doctors overall, meaning they play a key role in levelling up healthcare across the UK.

Unfortunately, current visa regulations mean these trainees face significant bureaucracy if they wish to remain in UK general practice after completing training, putting both their contributions and the NHS's investment at risk.

GP training is a three-year programme, during which time IMGs (whether on a tier 2 or Health and Care visa) are sponsored by the statutory education body in the relevant UK nation. On completing training, these GPs are required to find an employing practice to act as a sponsor. This poses a significant administrative challenge for all parties. GPs can be left feeling undervalued or anxious about their future in the UK, while practices often do not have sponsorship licences in place, and struggle to secure licenses in the short time before visas expire. As a result, NHS England and the relevant bodies across the UK are left with a significant task to try to support newly qualified IMGs with finding appropriate employing practices who can sponsor visas. We understand that hundreds of GPs need this support each year, and this number is likely to grow as more EEA doctors who do not currently hold settled status begin to move into the workforce.

GPs are disadvantaged compared to doctors working in other medical specialties. Current regulations allow IMGs to apply for indefinite leave to remain after five years in the UK. As every other medical specialty has training which lasts more than five years, most IMGs can secure indefinite leave to remain while still sponsored by their training body.

To address this problem, all IMGs should be offered indefinite leave to remain in the UK on successful completion of GP specialty training. This would put these doctors on an even footing with their peers working in secondary care and would encourage them to continue to live and work in the UK after their training, meaning the NHS's investment is not lost. Such an approach would also make general practice a more attractive career path for IMGs, helping to deliver the Government's commitment to 6,000 more GPs in England and expand the GP workforce across the UK.

Until this happens, visas for IMGs should, by default, extend for at least three months after the trainee's expected completion date, to give these newly qualified doctors time to find an appropriate employer, and the employer time to secure a sponsorship licence, if necessary. The Home Office and UKVI should also work with NHS bodies in the four nations to support

practices to navigate the process of becoming sponsors, which will likely be new territory for many. These steps will make it easier to match newly qualified international GPs with appropriate employers.

I am happy to meet with you to discuss these proposals further and any solutions that you may have. International medical graduates are a key part of the UK's GP workforce, and it is vital that we act now to support these doctors to remain in UK general practice for the long-term.

As this matter relates to healthcare professionals, I have copied in the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for information.

Yours sincerely
Professor Martin Marshall
Chair, Royal College of General Practitioners

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