

Implications of the European Union referendum result for government policies on ensuring safe staffing levels in the National Health Service and social care services

House of Lords,
Thursday 21 July 2016

About the BMA

The British Medical Association (BMA) is a voluntary professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care. We have a membership of over 170,000, which continues to grow each year.

On 23rd June 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union (EU). The outcome of the referendum has created great uncertainty for EU nationals currently living and working in the UK regarding their future status. While the BMA acknowledges that the exact terms of the process by which the UK will depart the EU are unclear and may remain so for some time, it is vital that the Government offers these individuals the clarity and reassurance they deserve regarding their future status in the UK. This is vital, particularly in key public services such as the NHS, to aid workforce planning to and ensure safe staffing levels are maintained.

Key points

- A significant number of EU nationals work in health and social care organisations across the UK. In England, there are approximately 135,000 EU nationals working in the NHS and adult social care system. This represents about five per cent of the NHS workforce and six per cent in adult social care.
- In 2014, more than 10,000 doctors working in the UK (6.6% of the UK medical workforce) received their primary medical qualification in another European Economic Area (EEA) country¹.
- The EU's policy of freedom of movement and mutual recognition of professional qualifications helps ensure that gaps in the UK medical workforce are filled quickly.
- We are deeply concerned by the ongoing political uncertainty surrounding the future of EU nationals living and working in the UK and the risk that the lack of clarity may cause some health professionals to leave the UK.
- We are calling on the Government to offer these health professionals the certainty and reassurance they deserve regarding their rights to live and work in the UK.
- It is vital to acknowledge the contribution made by highly skilled migrants, including doctors, in delivering and sustaining public services, and we condemn the xenophobic attacks by individuals who have taken the referendum result as a green light to attack the NHS staff who care for them.



Contribution of EU nationals to the NHS workforce

Much of the rhetoric about immigration during the EU referendum campaign focused on the pressures that increased immigration has placed on public services including the health service, housing and schools. We believe it is important to acknowledge the contribution made by highly skilled European migrants, including doctors, in delivering and sustaining public services, such as the NHS and our universities.

The EU's policy of freedom of movement and the mutual recognition of professional qualifications within the EU has enabled many health and social care professionals from countries within the EEA to work in the UK². In England, there are approximately 135,000 EU nationals working in the NHS and adult social care system. This represents about five per cent of the NHS workforce and six per cent in adult social care. In 2014, 10,242 doctors (6.6% of the UK medical workforce) received their primary medical qualification in another European Economic Area (EEA) country. Furthermore, figures from the GMC reveal that in 2016, more than 30,000 doctors who received their primary medical qualification in another EEA country were registered to practise medicine in the UK³.

These doctors have become essential members of the UK's medical workforce and the NHS is dependent on them to provide a high quality, reliable and safe service to patients. These highly skilled professionals have enhanced the UK health system over the years, improving the diversity of the profession to reflect a changing population, and filling shortages in specialties which may otherwise have remained empty.

We are asking the Government to urgently take steps to give EU nationals working in the NHS the certainty and reassurance they deserve regarding their future status in the UK. Given the length of time taken to train a doctor, a failure to offer doctors from the EU certainty about their future status risks not only undermining workforce planning in the NHS but also the ability of the health service to maintain safe staffing levels and patient safety.

Furthermore, it is also essential that the NHS retains the ability to recruit professionals quickly and easily from other countries when there is not a sufficient number of health professionals within the UK to fill shortages in specialties.

Xenophobic attacks on NHS staff

The BMA's first priority is the safety and wellbeing of our members so that they can continue to deliver high-quality patient care. The NHS is enriched by the contribution of international doctors and so we unreservedly condemn the xenophobic attacks by individuals who have taken the referendum result as a green light to attack the NHS staff who care for them.

For further information, please contact:

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¹ BMA, 2014 Medical Workforce Briefing, 2015, pg. 11.

² King's Fund, Five Big Issues for Health and Social Care after the Brexit Vote', 30 June 2016

³ [GMC- List of Registered Medical Practitioners- statistics](#)