

“The international response to Ebola”

Lords Short Debate Thursday 6 November

The British Medical Association (BMA) is an apolitical professional association and representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine all over the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care. We have a membership of over 153,000, which continues to grow every year.

There is currently an outbreak of Ebola Viral Disease (EVD) mainly affecting Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea in West Africa. The 2013-2014 outbreak has been more difficult to control than previous epidemics, and so far has claimed 4,951 lives and affected 13,567 people¹. EVD has also been confirmed in patients in Spain and the United States of America and there are concerns that the disease could spread further.

In October 2014 the BMA urged the World Medical Association (WMA) to:

- **call on the international community to immediately provide the necessary supplies of personal protective equipment, including gloves, masks and gowns, to protect healthcare workers and ancillary staff and reduce the risk of cross infection**
- **call on all those managing the epidemic to commit to adequate training in infection control measures, including personal protective equipment for all staff and caregivers who might come into contact with infective materials**
- **call on national and local governments to increase public communication about basic infection control practices**
- **honour those working in these exceptional circumstances, and strongly recommend that national governments and international agencies work with healthcare workers on the ground to offer stakeholders training and support to reduce the risks they face in treating patients and in seeking to control the epidemic**
- **call upon the World Health Organization (WHO) to facilitate research into the timeliness and effectiveness of international interventions, so that planning and interventions in future health emergencies can be better informed**
- **strongly urge all countries, especially those not yet affected, to educate healthcare workers about the current case definition, in addition to strengthening infection control methodologies, disease surveillance and contact tracing in order to prevent transmission within countries**
- **call for National Medical Associations to contact their national governments to act as described above.**

The motion was passed unanimously².

The BMA sees the potential for doctors working in the British medical system to provide care in the affected countries, especially doctors originally from the affected areas. However, visa restrictions experienced by some doctors made it difficult for them to travel overseas for periods

of longer than a month. In October, the BMA called on the Government to relax restrictions on doctors travelling to the affected areas. The Government have committed to concessions for doctors wishing to take time out of employment to assist in ebola affected countries, extending the amount of time during which doctors can take unpaid absence to six months without it affecting their visa arrangements.

This briefing focuses on what can be done to aid support being given in West Africa by doctors currently working in the UK.

UK doctors providing care in West Africa

There are a number of doctors based in the UK who are originally from the areas currently most affected by EVD, and who would like to go back to their country of origin for a defined period of time to give medical help to those affected. This would be of great benefit to those areas of West Africa where the virus is prevalent as these doctors are likely to speak the local language so are more able to give quick and accessible help, and may be more trusted to give assistance if they share the same ethnic background as those they are treating.

Existing visa rules meant that these doctors would have found it very difficult to travel overseas for longer than a month due to the problems which then arise over their visas, which they need to have in order to work in the UK.

The BMA wrote to the Government in October highlighting this barrier to UK doctors providing assistance in the affected areas³. Since then, the Home Secretary has agreed to make concessions to immigration rules so that doctors currently working in the UK on a Tier 2 (General) visa who are originally from West Africa, and who want to go back home to treat victims of Ebola, can do so without it causing problems with their UK visa. The BMA is now publicising this to members and other doctors and liaising with NHS Employers to let them know about the concession to the rules.

For many years, the NHS has benefitted from the dedication and commitment of overseas doctors, including doctors from West Africa. During this terrible crisis, it is essential that we make it as easy as possible for these doctors to return to their country of origin for a defined period to assist their countries.

We are pleased that the Government has agreed to make an exception to the Immigration Rules so that doctors who are subject to the Rules and who are working under a Tier 2 (General) visa, are allowed to travel to West Africa for up to six months to give medical help to those suffering from the Ebola virus, without this resulting in curtailment of their visa to work in the UK, provided they have the agreement of their sponsoring NHS trust or Local Education and Training Board.

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References

¹ WHO: [Ebola response roadmap update](#). 31 October 2014.

² BMA Press Release: 8 October 2014, [BMA calls on international medical community to take urgent action on Ebola epidemic](#)

³ [BMA letter to the Home Secretary](#), October 2014