Oral Question – refugee doctors, tabled by Baroness Finlay of Llandaff

House of Lords
Monday 24 February

About the BMA
The BMA (British Medical Association) is a professional association and trade union representing and negotiating on behalf of all doctors and medical students in the UK. It is a leading voice advocating for outstanding health care and a healthy population. It is an association providing members with excellent individual services and support throughout their lives.

Key points:
• Refugee doctors can play an important role in helping address the NHS workforce shortage. However, the return to practising can be a long and complicated process. As of October 2019, there were 767 refugee doctors registered on the BMA Refugee Doctor Initiative
• It is often difficult to identify refugee doctors before they enter the UK. More should be done to identify medical professionals at refugee camps with a view of resettling them in the UK.
• The key challenge is ensuring they are supported once they are here so they can begin practising as soon as possible.
• The BMA (British Medical Association) has developed a Refugee Doctor Initiative to provide a free package of benefits for refugee doctors who are working towards GMC registration.

Barriers to practising
• Refugee doctors currently face a number of delays and obstacles to being able to practice medicine in the UK.
• Firstly, they are required to apply for refugee status, a process that can be complex and difficult for people to navigate.
• They can also face difficulties receiving funding for support programmes to help them register in the UK. Funding for such programmes is often a postcode lottery and the amount of support available is often dependent on where refugee doctors reside in the UK.
• Refugee doctors are then required to pass the necessary exams, as required by the General Medical Council which can take up to 24 months if not longer. There is also a considerable expense attached with registering, and the associated examinations.
• There is also a lack of facilities in NHS Trusts to train refugee doctors.

Potential solutions
• The BMA has developed a Refugee Doctor Initiative to provide a free package of benefits for refugee doctors who are working towards GMC registration. As of October 2019, there were 767 refugee doctors registered on the BMA Refugee Doctor Initiative
• Other organisations, including the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, the Royal College of Surgeons and the Council for At-Risk Academics also support refugees with financial support and advice.

• Last year, the BMA hosted a high-level stakeholder roundtable meeting to discuss the funding of refugee doctors across the UK and how to expand support programmes. Recommendations arising from the session included:
  o Establishing a single point of contact with the UK Government and NHS
  o Employing a proactive approach to identifying healthcare professionals in refugee camps, with a view of resettling them in the UK, should be taken.
  o Evaluating existing support schemes to help strengthen the evidence-base for further funding.
  o Developing an innovative approach is needed to support refugee doctors who might lack documentary evidence to gain GMC registration, such as asking them to undertake the final year of a medical degree followed by the Medical Licensing Assessment.

Case study

Building Bridges, funded by NHS Health Education North Central and East London, and jointly run by the Refugee Council the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit and Glowing Results, helps refugee doctors through the process of gaining their GMC registration. The support ranges from help with English language tests through to clinical exams, to working on a clinical attachment. The programme supports people like Dr Attayee, who came to the UK after fleeing persecution from the Taliban in Afghanistan. After arriving in the UK, he was put in touch with the programme, and now works in the NHS as a senior house officer at Queen’s Hospital in Romford.

You can read more here https://www.bma.org.uk/news/2017/june/building-bridges-for-refugee-doctors

Current situation

• There is commitment to a new funding model in Scotland based on a bursary scheme of £6,000 for refugee doctors to pay for education and exams. This also provides the opportunity for the doctor to decide whether to pay back the money or stay long term in Scotland.

• The Home Office are considering strategies to better place refugees across the UK (such as linking resettlement refugees to specific job opportunities) with the caveat that other priorities, such as housing or schools may take precedence.

• The BMA will continue the conversation with the Home Office, DWP and DHSC on the importance of putting better support in place for refugee doctors to resettle in the UK.

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For further information, please contact: