

COVID-19 and international medical graduates: the frustrated and forgotten future NHS workforce

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Sir,

COVID-19 infection and the resulting lockdown has directly or indirectly affected millions of people in the UK. Among these are several international medical graduates, who were in the UK to sit Part 2 of the Professional Linguistic Assessment Board (PLAB). These international medical graduates were forced to stay in the UK with no other option as a result of lockdown. On 2 June the General Medical Council announced the cancellation of all PLAB 2 exams scheduled for 2020 (General Medical Council, 2020), although the General Medical Council subsequently announced recommencement of the suspended PLAB examinations. Owing to international travel restrictions, these international medical graduates were stranded in the UK facing unusual challenges.

A short, anonymised survey undertaken among 50 stranded international medical graduates, after the PLAB 2 exams had been cancelled, highlighted that the cancellation of PLAB 2 exams has had a negative impact on all of their psychosocial wellbeing. The unexpected extended stay has exhausted their financial resources. Of respondents, 50% felt that the guidance received from the General Medical Council was inadequate and felt unsupported, and 30% have contemplated not returning to the UK again. Approximately 80% said that they anticipate that the General Medical Council will introducing a virtual assessment for PLAB 2.

The NHS medical workforce is significantly understaffed. International medical graduates make important contributions to the NHS (NHS Digital, 2020). Uncertainty in the PLAB 2 examination is likely to have a significant impact on workforce recruitment as international medical graduates may look for opportunities elsewhere, thereby worsening the existing workforce shortage.

With the world discovering new possibilities and previously unexplored options, it is appropriate that the General Medical Council considers an innovative approach to the PLAB 2 assessment by embracing the latest technology to retain the existing workforce (and encourage more graduates to join).

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