



'The British Government did not take into consideration the yeomen contribution made by IMGs to the NHS before announcing the new legislation'

# FROM OASIS TO MIRAGE

**New legislation means that thousands of international medical graduates in the UK are facing uncertain futures.**

*Raghu Pillarisetti reports*

Over the past several decades, the UK has established a track record of providing high quality postgraduate training to international medical graduates (IMGs). A couple of years ago, the *Indian Journal of Surgery (IJS)* published a very popular article highlighting evidence-based information about the realities of obtaining surgical training in the UK.<sup>1,2</sup> However, recent developments have rendered this publication out of date in many respects. The aim of this article is to address these developments, which will no doubt have a significant and long-lasting impact on the future training prospects of IMGs in the UK.

## **Increasing competition**

Over the past couple of years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of doctors applying for training posts in the UK. The reasons are:

- Exponential increase in IMGs coming to the UK
- Significant increase in newly qualified doctors graduating from UK medical schools, the number of which has doubled since 1998<sup>3</sup>
- Steady increase in students from the European Union (EU) graduating from UK medical schools, and equally, graduates who have qualified in the EU outside Britain entering the UK for better training opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Since March 2006, the number of IMGs struggling to obtain postgraduate training in the UK has spiralled out of control, the main reasons being fundamental changes introduced to postgraduate training with the implementation of the Foundation Programme and a major shift in immigration policy for IMGs.<sup>4-5</sup>

## Radical changes

From August 2006, all UK medical graduates will enter a two-year Foundation Programme (F1 and F2) immediately following graduation.<sup>4</sup> Most IMGs will not be able to secure F1 post as they will have completed PRHO training in their home countries before coming to the UK. As most of the F2 posts will already have been taken up by those in F1 posts, there is very little scope for IMGs to obtain an F2 post.

There has been a sudden, unexpected, and radical shift in the immigration policy for IMGs in the UK. The new immigration ruling, announced in March 2006 by Lord Warner, the British Health Minister, came into effect a mere one month later in April 2006. This legislation effectively ended 'equal opportunities' for doctors from the Indian subcontinent and those from outside the EU. After April 2006, all doctors who wish to work in the UK from outside the EU are now required to have a work permit. The move means that any NHS Trust in the UK wishing to employ a doctor from outside the EU will have to prove that a doctor who has graduated in the UK cannot fill the vacant post, ending the current permit free training arrangement for IMGs. There has been a chorus of disapproval and protest

from all sections of the medical establishment in the UK, including the Royal Colleges, British Medical Association (BMA), and overseas organisations representing IMGs in the UK.

The Government did not discuss or consult on this crucial issue with the BMA or any other international organisation representing the interests of IMGs before implementing the legislation. It is estimated that 15,000 IMGs, mostly from the Indian Subcontinent, will be affected as a result of this rushed legislation. This knee jerk legislation has traumatised the UK's IMG community, causing enormous anguish to thousands of doctors and their families, and making their futures uncertain. As the doctors who have been affected do not have financial, moral, or psychological support to withstand this crisis, many of them have already gone back to their home countries and hundreds more are booking their return tickets.

This announcement will have an extraordinary effect on three groups of IMGs:

- Those doctors who have recently come to the UK to obtain postgraduate training. This group has already expended time, energy, and financial resources in passing the PLAB exam. They have not found a job for many months and some of them are currently working illegally doing menial jobs to survive in the UK. Around 5,000 IMGs are currently unemployed in the UK and one of the doctors in this situation recently committed suicide.<sup>6</sup>
- Those currently working in the NHS, many of whom have just begun their training or are in the midst of their

training. Most of them will have to return to their countries of origin after completion of their current job and commence their training all over again, as the prospects for getting another job in the UK are very poor.

- Prospective trainees who hoped to come to the UK for specialist training.

## Conclusion

Over the past several decades, IMGs have immensely benefited from structured postgraduate training in the UK. These doctors have worked very hard and made tremendous contributions to the NHS.

Sadly, the British Government did not take into consideration the yeoman contribution made by IMGs to the NHS before announcing the new legislation. This will have a dreadful impact on thousands of doctors already in the UK looking for equal opportunity in hope of finding a training placement. It will also shatter the hopes of many prospective trainees from overseas.

Is there light at the end of the tunnel? Well, the answer lies in the title of this article, which attempts to paint a realistic picture for doctors from non-European countries, particularly those from the Indian Subcontinent. For the foreseeable future, I believe that IMGs should stop chasing the oasis as it has become a mirage. ■

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References are available on the website: [www.surgeonsnews.info](http://www.surgeonsnews.info)