

Government gives temporary relief to migrant NHS workers from “immigration health surcharge”



Organisations representing international doctors and nurses are calling for scrapping of the £625 health surcharge for using the NHS. Critics say it is unfair and wrong to charge overseas-born health professionals for using a service which they help to fund by paying income tax and national insurance. The government defended the charge saying it does not undermine the work done by overseas staff for the NHS.

Dr Chandra Kanneganti, chair of the British International Doctors Association told ITV News that it doesn't seem fair for those who are already paying tax and national insurance to pay twice. He said, “ You will have seen the enormous contribution of international healthcare workers to the NHS”.

Dr Kanneganti pointed out that several doctors and nurses from overseas who are in the frontline of the NHS, and a number of other healthcare workers, have died. He referred to the enormous contribution that international healthcare workers are making to the NHS and called on the government to show goodwill by scrapping the NHS surcharge for NHS workers.

The annual health surcharge is payable by foreign workers and limited leave to remain visa holders including dependents and must be paid in advance for the entire length of their visa duration, with no ability to defer payments. An estimated 153,000 non-EU residents are in the United Kingdom who will have to pay the annual charge to use the health service.

“The cost of the surcharge is currently £400 a year and will rise to £624 from October after an announcement in the March budget. EEA migrants coming to the UK from January 2021 will also have to pay this.

Mr Brandon Lewis, a Cabinet Minister said that the surcharge ensures every one pays for the health service in a “fair and balanced” way, ensuring those who have not made lifelong contributions to the service are not able to benefit from the NHS without having to contribute. He added other countries around the world have the surcharge and that the UK is not alone in charging for this kind of access.

He explained, “People who come here to work will more often than not do that for a limited period of time, the surcharge is around making sure they are giving something that is fair balance between their ability to access it, as it is

for all of us.

However, a Home Office statement said, We are immensely grateful for the work NHS doctors, nurses and paramedics are doing to tackle coronavirus, and this is why we applied a one-year visa extension to all those whose visas are due to expire before 1st October 2020 -this is completely free of charge and includes an exemption from the Immigration Health Surcharge.”

Eva Omondi, a nurse based in Luton, said, “I don't think it's fair.” She is facing a total of £11,000 immigration surcharge fee for herself and her family members. They really need to look at this as an emergency and just take it off because it's even embarrassing for our government to sit down and make decisions on members of staff who are key to the nation.

An Egyptian doctor working in the UK told BBC, “what more can you do for a country to prove that you love it, than sacrifice your life for the sake of the country?”

Other medical associations had also warned that at a the time when the NHS desperately needed to alleviate continual and chronic staff shortages. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN), British Medical Association (BMA) and Royal College of Physicians also criticised the plans as shortsighted and have written to the Prime Minister warning him that the move will prove counterproductive.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the government to provide a temporary relief to cope with the shortage of staff in the NHS. In a letter to the Home Secretary Priti Patel, the British Association of Physicians of Indian origin acknowledged that the announcement March offering automatic renewals of visas, free of surcharge “was welcome but not adequate.” We thank you for this welcome step, but it is not adequate.” The Association has suggested that the government should consider offering ‘indefinite’ leave and exemption from the surcharge.