ILR for Overseas NHS workers during COVID-19: Luxury or necessity?

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The effect of COVID 19 pandemic has been devastating for every country in the world and the UK is no different. The burden on the NHS has been unprecedented and required war time measures to deal with the crisis. Frontline workers had their workload almost trebled as sick patients continued to report to the ED in droves. The sound of the blue light ambulances on the street and near the hospital round the clock became the new normal as cities plunged into lockdown. People were asked to stay at home, work from home and go outside only for basic necessities and exercise once a day. People who had to leave home for work majorly comprised the key workers of which the major chunk of them were healthcare workers. This included doctors, nurses, paramedics, hospital cleaners, radiology technicians, care home staff and the managerial staff needed to run the administrative part of the overburdened hospitals. The list is endless and could include many other people.

The staff of the NHS, are a healthy mix of local and international workers. Mainstream media often declare that the: “NHS would collapse if it wasn’t for immigrants”. The UK doesn’t make it easy however, for international staff to work here. Visas need to be renewed periodically to continue to live and work here at great financial and emotional cost to the applicants. As a frontline medic, facing work load and stress levels at an all-time high, the thought of completing administrative paperwork is a major deterrent from focussing on the job itself. It leads to arranging all this paperwork beyond work hours which grossly reduces the time to rest and recuperate from the daily chores. Family time is also compromised for people with young families and that can potentially lead to mental health issues. Every worker irrespective of their domicile status has given and continues to give 100% effort towards their job which has been appreciated by people from all sections of the society.

International doctors, here on work visas get denied the same benefits that British citizen have. For example, International Doctors need to pay almost three times the fees of those required for a citizen doctor if they were to sign up for an academic post graduate program - which is a major deterrent. Thus, it is potentially a huge compromise as clinical knowledge is not upgraded and patients miss out on even better evidence based clinical care. The current situation of people working from home has caused major delays in issuing of work visas and British Residency Permit (BRP) without which we are legally not allowed to start work in the UK. The overall outcome being that the available human resources cannot be utilized and the stress on the existing work force of doctors remains the same or occasionally increased.

Last year, the government took many positive steps towards the international workforce of the NHS by exempting them from paying the Immigration health Surcharge (IHS) which otherwise was a huge financial burden on doctors waiting to start work in the UK. Recently they have also agreed to provide Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) to dependants of healthcare workers who pass away during the pandemic while caring for the COVID 19 patients. The general public feedback to is that it no
doubt provides for a secure future for the families but for the worker who is on the line of fire, it seems like he/she is useful only when dead. So I think the need of the hour is to extend the ILR to healthcare workers who have given everything during the peak time of COVID so that they can truly call UK their home. Several international healthcare workers have suffered fatalities due to COVID who have families back in their home country. News reports mention France and UAE have extended the offer of citizenship to their international healthcare worker force as an appreciation for their contribution during the COVID times. UK can set an example to the world by considering the above and offering Indefinite Leave to Remain for all healthcare workers.