

End the Government's 'hostile environment' in our NHS

Home Office policies have brought in a cruel new approach towards people in England whose immigration status is uncertain. This includes being forced to pay upfront for NHS healthcare.

- Patients who can't prove their immigration status now face upfront charges of up to 150% of the cost.
- Migrants are not 'health tourists' looking for free treatment. They are vulnerable people often on low incomes, looking for resident status.
- Hospital trusts including Lewisham and Greenwich Trust are told to check patient details with the Home Office and report anyone who owes £500 for two months or more, unless they have a repayment plan.
- These changes undermine the founding principle of the NHS that healthcare should be available to all, based on need, and not the ability to pay. Charging could be extended to other patients in future.
- We know already that if there is no Brexit deal on 31 October, hospitals have been told to prepare to charge 2 million Europeans in the UK who haven't yet got 'settled status'. Many European nationals work in the NHS.
- The professional commitment and duty of NHS staff are being undermined if they are forced to check documents and potentially deny care.
- Data-sharing with the Home Office undermines trust and patient confidentiality.
- The climate of fear revealed by the Windrush scandal is deterring some migrants from seeking NHS treatment they are entitled to. Many delay seeking healthcare until their health has worsened.
- **Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable** and are asked to pay £6-9000 for having a baby. We know that many women are frightened away by this charge and that there have been serious consequences for them and their child's health.
- NHS charges for migrants are opposed by the British Medical Association, which represents all doctors, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and the Royal College of Midwives.
- **We all lose through migrant health charges – they are only 0.3% of the NHS budget and are unfair, unsafe and expensive to collect.**



Real impact of the 'hostile environment'

Albert Thompson* went for his first radiotherapy session for prostate cancer, only to be told by a hospital administrator that unless he could produce a British passport, he would be charged £54,000. Albert had lived and worked in London for 44 years, having arrived from Jamaica as a teenager, yet the Home Office still disputed his eligibility to remain. He finally received treatment, delayed by six months, following media coverage.¹

Beatrice* fled an abusive relationship three weeks before the birth of her son. She relied on her local church to get by after her academic visa expired and her application for asylum was refused. She was billed £6000 after giving birth in an NHS hospital. She was harassed by debt recovery calls, even after explaining that she was not allowed to work and had no means to pay. The Home Office sent a letter to her child saying that he was "a dependant of someone liable to be detained".²

Kelemua, whose breast cancer had spread to her abdomen and spine, was refused urgent hospital treatment after the Home Office denied her asylum claim. Her doctors believed chemotherapy was "immediately necessary", as her spreading cancer was causing crippling pain. Kelemua had fled Ethiopia to arrive in Britain five years earlier, after her partner was shot dead by pro-government forces for taking part in protests.

Following press coverage and intervention by lawyers, her hospital successfully applied to treat her on grounds of urgency.³

Bhavani was in a coma for a week and a half after undergoing major surgery but was sent a letter refusing her application for leave to remain and threatening forcible removal. The Indian national's fiancé appealed while she was still unconscious, providing doctors' letters showing that her life would be at risk if she travelled. But the Home Office said that while the medical treatment she was receiving was "unlikely" to be available to the same standard in India, this did not entitle her to remain in the UK, as she could receive "palliative care" instead.⁴

Saloum fled Gambia 10 years ago after challenging the government for condoning the widespread use of FGM (female genital mutilation). In the UK, he was subjected to labour exploitation, until he collapsed in the street and was taken to hospital, where he was diagnosed with two brain tumours and lung cancer and given just days to live. Following initial treatment, he was sent away as not eligible for free NHS care. After pressure from the charity Doctors of the World, he was given some hospital treatment. He died in April 2019.⁵

1. The Guardian 24/4/18 2. Six Mothers, Maternity Action 2018. 3. The Guardian 7/6/18 4. The Independent 12/5/19
5. The Guardian 25/5/2019 *names changed

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Write to your MP, local Mayor and Councillors asking them to back the campaign to end the hostile environment
- Contact your professional body/union or political organisation to find out what they are doing about migrant health charges
- Keep informed by following the Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign on Facebook or www.savelewishamhospital.com and keepournhspublic.com
- Attend local meetings organised by SLH Campaign and help in the fight to oppose these charges and to protect our NHS

INFORMATION:

Patients Not Passports patientsnotpassports.co.uk

Docs Not Cops www.docsnocops.co.uk/

Medact www.medact.org/project/migration-health

Maternity Action <https://maternityaction.org.uk/charging-for-nhs-maternity-care/>

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants www.jcwi.org.uk