

PRESS RELEASE

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Coalition calls for the immediate suspension of NHS charging to prevent more COVID-19 deaths over the winter

Charging migrants for hospital services is putting lives and public health at risk, and could undermine the UK's COVID-19 response, warns a coalition of academics, non-governmental organisations, professional bodies and people with lived experience of healthcare exclusion.

Today, Doctors of the World UK (DOTW), Lancet Migration: global collaboration to advance migration health, and the Faculty of Public Health (FPH) are launching a coalition campaign to call for universal and equitable access to NHS services during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. More than 20 organisations have already joined the [Hands Up for Our Health campaign](#) and coalition building is ongoing.

The coalition said as a first priority, the UK Government must immediately suspend the NHS charging regulations, which pose a serious risk to public health and are causing unnecessary suffering and death among some of those in the most vulnerable situations in the UK, such as destitute migrants.

This public health change is urgently needed and was highlighted at the height of the pandemic when, in April, DOTW, Lancet Migration, FPH, along with more than 30 other medical and non-profit organisations, [wrote to the Home and Health secretaries](#) urging them to suspend charging and all associated immigration checks and data sharing to ensure no one in the UK was prevented from seeking care due to fear of immigration enforcement. This was followed by a [policy brief](#) from Lancet Migration in May calling for urgent inclusion of migrants and refugees in the UK COVID-19 response. But so far the government has failed to act.

With COVID-19 cases on the rise again and winter fast approaching, the government cannot afford to ignore the experts and wealth of evidence any longer. Failure to include migrant and refugee populations in the UK's COVID-19 response at this critical point in time means any public health measures to control the virus are inequitable and ineffective.

“The COVID-19 pandemic shows clearly that nobody is protected unless everybody is protected,” said DOTW, FPH and Lancet Migration in a joint statement. “Only by including all populations in equitable access to healthcare, particularly those most marginalised, can we overcome global health challenges such as COVID-19.”

The NHS charging regulations (2015 and 2017) were brought in by the Theresa May government as part of a suite of policies designed to create a “very hostile environment” for people without leave to remain in the UK. Under the regulations, NHS trusts in England must charge migrants living in the UK for most hospital services. Migrants on a visa generally have to pay a surcharge - which MPs recently voted to increase from £400 to £624 (effective 1 October

2020) - while those without immigration status and asylum seekers with refused claims are charged an inflated 150 percent of the NHS tariff for their treatment.

As of 2017, NHS trusts must also withhold treatment until a patient has paid in full - unless their situation makes their situation “urgent” or “immediately necessary”. However, urgent or immediately necessary treatment is often wrongly withheld because of the complexity of the charging rules. This has led to treatment being delayed or denied altogether, causing unnecessary suffering and, in some cases, death.

Charging mostly affects people in vulnerable circumstances, such as survivors of human trafficking, and the impact goes beyond secondary care. A [qualitative study carried out by DOTW in April](#) found some excluded groups in England weren’t coming forward to health services during the pandemic for fear of being charged or reported to the Home Office, despite an exemption for COVID-19 testing and treatment.

The Hands Up for Our Health coalition campaign calls for a united push for universal access to NHS services for everyone living in the UK, but particularly the most marginalised, with three key asks for central government:

1. To immediately suspend the NHS charging regulations, giving everyone the chance to see a doctor or nurse when they need to. This public health change is needed urgently as charging migrants for hospital services threatens the health of both individuals and the population as a whole during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.
2. To carry out research and an investigation into the impact of charging regulations on individual and public health, including during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to invite coalition partners to take part in joint action to bring about long-term reform of the charging policy.
3. To commit to improving access to all NHS services for everyone living in the UK as part of the government’s plan to “build back better”. This should include developing policy alternatives to the existing regulations.

People with lived experience of the asylum system and healthcare exclusion:

Kemi

Kemi is a mother-of-four and refugee living in London. Originally from Nigeria, she has been in the UK for six years and was recently granted refugee status after a four-year wait. Kemi first came to Doctors of the World after being wrongly refused GP registration. She was diagnosed with depression and supported to register with a GP and get the care she needed. Kemi is one of DOTW’s National Health Advisers, a steering group made up of people with lived experience of healthcare exclusion. She explains why she supports the Hands Up for our Health campaign:

“I have been in their shoes. I know how it feels when you can’t access doctors, the damage it can do to people. If not for Doctors of the World, I now would be dead and leaving my four children alone... I want to be on this campaign to enable them [the government] to know how it feels, to let them know the impacts they’re having if people don’t access good health services.

And I want to join so they will know how to better the services for migrants and refugees... Not just refugees and migrants - I know of many people that don't know their rights when it comes to health issues. To make sure everything is improved for everybody, so everybody has access to good quality health services, that's why I've joined the campaign."

Adeola*

Adeola is a mother, an asylum seeker and a survivor of human trafficking. Since arriving in the UK, she has struggled to access a GP, medication and mental health support, which has made it hard for her to manage her mental illness. Adeola was also wrongly sent a bill for hospital care after giving birth to her son, but was able to advocate for herself and defend the charges. She is one of DOTW's National Health Advisers, a steering group made up of people with lived experience of healthcare exclusion.

"We are currently in a pandemic and the government should be protecting everyone in this country, but people with no status or visa are not protected, even though we are here. This is discrimination and unsafe for everyone. Many frontline workers have worked hard to protect this country from COVID-19 and yet many of them cannot access support. BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] communities are two to three times more likely to die from COVID-19. They have to work more, are exposed more [and] have to live in cramped conditions because they can't get any help from the government.

"Don't let people die in silence, don't let people die because they're scared of the immigration, the way the system is... We need this campaign to just help, to make things easier for asylum seekers, refugees and people that don't have documents, yet... Healthcare should be one of the most important things, to look after our health... It shouldn't be something you need to fight for."

**Name changed for privacy reasons.*

Doctors of the World UK Head of Policy and Advocacy, Anna Miller, said:

"In our clinic we see patients too afraid to go to hospital in case they receive a bill they have no chance of ever being able to pay. Often these are people who are already living in very difficult circumstances, without a secure home or enough money to meet their basic food and clothing needs. As we head into winter, no one wants a situation where people can't get medical help when they need it or are forced to manage health conditions alone. We really need every person and every family to feel safe to go forward to NHS services - including COVID-19 testing services - without the risk of financial or legal consequences.

"Then there's the issue of misapplication of the charging regulations - the rules are so complex that they are often wrongly applied by NHS trusts, leading to urgent or immediately necessary treatment being withheld. In June 2018, DOTW launched its Hospital Access Project to help people get the hospital care they urgently need. Through this project we provide specialist casework support and legal advice to those denied NHS services as a result of the charging regulations. All our patients are in extremely vulnerable situations and include victims of gender-

based violence and torture, asylum seekers, destitute refused asylum seekers and migrant children. These are the victims of this harmful and highly unfair policy.”

Faculty of Public Health President Professor Maggie Rae said:

“FPH fully supports the call for the immediate suspension of NHS charging regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Preventing a vulnerable group of society from accessing healthcare during a global pandemic causes a clear threat to public health; not only do we risk the lives of those affected by these regulations, many of whom are already victims of terrible circumstance, but we risk the lives of those they come into contact with. It is well established that we need to work together to beat COVID-19, and only through protecting the health of all in society can we prevent the spread of the virus. Suspending NHS charging regulations for migrants and refugees is an important step to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and save lives.”

Dr Lucinda Hiam, NHS GP, DOTW Clinical Lead for UK Policy and Advocacy, and Programme Officer, Lancet Migration: global collaboration to advance migration health, said:

“As a doctor, I see first-hand the impact the UK charging regulations have on patients: they cause distress, delays in treatment, and deter those in need from seeing a doctor or nurse when they need to. More than ever, it is essential that everyone in our communities is included in healthcare. The Hands Up for Our Health campaign builds on [Lancet Migration's UK brief](#), which explained that COVID-19 can only be controlled if everyone, including migrants and refugees, is part of the response; and on the work of Lancet Migration to ensure [equitable access to healthcare for all](#), regardless of immigration status. The government must listen to the wide range of voices uniting to call for the charging regulations to be suspended as a matter of urgency.”

***The Lancet* Executive Editor Jocalyn Clark said:**

“*The Lancet* fully supports the coalition’s call for immediate suspension of NHS charges that unfairly impact already vulnerable migrants and refugees in the UK. Without equitable and universal access to NHS care, we will fail to fully protect our communities in the face of rising rates of COVID-19. As the Chief Medical Officer for England, Professor Chris Whitty, has emphasised, this pandemic is a challenge shared by every member of society and its successful resolution will demand a collective response. No one must be excluded from access to healthcare during this emergency. Suspending NHS charges is a necessary and urgent part of our COVID-19 response.”

For more information, visit handsupforourhealth.org.uk (link goes live on Tuesday).

For general campaign inquiries or to arrange interviews with people with lived experience, including Kemi, please contact Kimberley Vlastic at KVlastic@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk or 07491425808.

To arrange interviews with coalition spokespeople please see press contacts below.

Doctors of the World UK (DOTW) is part of the Médecins du Monde international network, an independent humanitarian movement. Doctors of the World UK has been a registered charity in England and Wales since 1998 and runs clinics providing medical care, information, and practical support to people unable to access NHS services. Our patients include refugees, people seeking asylum, people who have been trafficked, people experiencing homelessness, sex workers, migrants with insecure immigration status and Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. **Press contact:** Kimberley Vlastic, KVlastic@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk

The Faculty of Public Health (FPH) is a membership organisation for nearly 4,000 public health professionals across the UK and around the world. FPH is also a registered charity. Its role is to improve the health and wellbeing of local communities and national populations. **Press contact:** David Parkinson, davidparkinson@fph.org.uk

Lancet Migration: global collaboration to advance migration health is a collaboration between *The Lancet* and researchers, implementers, and others in the field of migration and health that aims to address evidence gaps and drive policy change, building on the recommendations of the UCL-*Lancet* Commission on Migration and Health published in December 2018. **Press contact:** Miriam Orcutt, m.orcutt@ucl.ac.uk | Dr Lucinda Hiam, l.hiam@ucl.ac.uk

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