

RCP briefing for Westminster Hall Debate on Visas for international doctors | 2 November 2022

The RCP represents over 40,000 members and fellows in the UK and internationally from over 30 medical specialties from cardiology and gastroenterology to infectious disease and respiratory medicine. Many of our members are at the forefront of tackling the backlog for diagnostic care.

With over 132,000 vacancies, there is a significant staffing crisis facing the NHS. Staffing shortages are the biggest barrier to meeting demand for care and bringing down NHS waiting lists which currently stand at a record 7 million. **The RCP's latest census found that more than half (52%) of advertised physician posts in England and Wales went unfilled in 2021 – the highest rate of unfilled posts since records began.**

These pressures are only set to worsen. The same 2021 RCP census found that **44% of current consultant physicians will reach retirement age in the next 10 years** (taking an average retirement age of 62–63 years). This means that the workforce will be further depleted at a time when demand for care will be increasing – the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates that, by 2040, there will be 17 million people in the UK over the age of 65. As more people at the start of their careers in medicine are working less than full time, the NHS will need a higher staff headcount in future.

Without significant investment in training more people in the UK, it is clear that overseas recruitment is a crucial part of the solution in the short and medium term. The RCP recommended in its [recent position paper on short and medium solutions for the NHS workforce](#) that health and care staff from overseas who wish to come to the UK and work in the NHS have the opportunities and support to do so. The transition to UK life for doctors and their families should be made as easy as possible.

The RCP firmly believes the NHS must be open and welcoming to international colleagues. But we should be aiming to train more doctors in the UK – not least because of the ethical concerns of recruiting professionals from other countries which may be experiencing their own workforce shortages.

A long-term plan for increasing staffing numbers, including expanding medical school places, is sorely needed to put the NHS workforce back on sustainable footing, restore timely access to care and protect patient safety.

The long-term workforce plan commissioned by government earlier this year must be delivered by the end of 2022 as planned, underpinned by the necessary funding settlement, with numbers of how many staff will be needed to meet demand.

That workforce strategy must:

- be based as far as possible on what we know about actual current and predicted future supply and demand, including the impact of increased flexible working;
- include projections of the numbers of staff needed to keep pace with demand;
- include a range of short-, medium- and long-term solutions including an expansion in medical school places to increase recruitment and improve retention
- commit to a review and refresh at least once within the lifetime of the existing strategy.