Prepare for a foreign fellow

Lindsay J Smith, Catherine Marraffa

Having an overseas graduate visit your department can be a rewarding experience for everyone: you gain a fresh enthusiastic worker for research or clinical work and the visitor gains a broader experience of medical practice. However, some forward planning is necessary to ensure that you both get the maximum out of the stay. A lot of daily tasks that are a routine part of your life may be difficult or even intimidating for someone from a different background.

One of the most important facts to know early in your preparation for your visitor is his or her family situation. Your enthusiastic helpful colleague may be reduced to an unworkable state because of worry about housing, spouse, accommodation, and schooling for the children.

Preparation

You should try to agree on a draft protocol of proposed work early in discussions. This allows the establishment of a background reading list. Remember that the library facilities may not be as extensive as you are used to and that forwarding key articles will allow valuable reading to be performed before arrival. A timetable of meetings including locations at which the research work may be presented will aid in the overall plan of your visitor's stay. Organise the use of the hospital and possibly university library ahead of arrival.

Cultural aspects

It should be remembered that the British culture embodies a historical perspective that differs significantly from other cultures in attitudes to social relationships, politics, and religion. With the majority of the NHS workforce being female, attitudes and actions that are acceptable in the fellow's home country may be construed as inappropriate or even as sexual harassment. Conversely, British attitudes may be deeply offensive to foreign fellows. Religious practices and holidays must be respected. Though it is difficult to broach such subjects, timely intervention can defuse potentially explosive situations.

Housing

It is always reassuring when travelling any distance to know that there is somewhere to stay at the journey's end. If at all possible make every effort to secure some accommodation either temporary or permanent for your visitor. Contacting the hospital personnel officer, nursing officer, or local council is a good place to start.

You should try to see the proposed accommodation yourself. Remember that what you would have put up with as a student or while working on rotation may not be the sort of place to call a home for 12 months or longer.

When inspecting accommodation look at the location with regard to public transport to the hospital. Obviously a reasonable standard of repair, adequacy of facilities, presence or absence of furnishing, and an adequate number of rooms for the family size should be taken into account.

Suggested documentation for a foreign fellow

- General Medical Council certificate
- Original or notarised copy of degrees and higher qualifications
- Own medical council's letter of good standing
- Reference from previous consultants at home (for locum work)
- Letter of medical insurance cover from original country (if doing private locum work)
- Letter of good standing from own bank
- Letter of reference from someone in the United Kingdom (for bank account)
- Original car insurance certificates and no claim bonus certificates.
- Letters from children's schools about years of education and standard of achievement at time of departure

Transport

You will need to consider whether the position that your overseas graduate is to fill will need a car. Posts such as community paediatrics and on call rotas covering two physically separated hospitals necessitate a car. Does the doctor have a driver's licence that is valid in the United Kingdom? Will he or she need to have an international driver's licence before arrival? The address of the AA (Automobile Association) or RAC (Royal Automobile Club) will help sort out these problems. The cost of cars and which dealers are reputable are two of the more daunting areas on arriving in a new country. Some guidelines about local dealers and prices in your area would be most welcome.

Try to obtain local public transport maps, ticket information, and a local street directory to send to or have ready for your visitor.

Children

Visitors bringing their children have particular needs that are often overlooked by permanent residents. Child benefit is payable once the children are resident for six months provided that a parent has a national insurance number. Children will probably fall sick at some time so the address of the local family health services authority for the names of general practitioners will facilitate finding a family doctor. Remember, you don't want to be peering down an auroscope at 5.30 on a Friday evening trying to decide what, if anything, is wrong. Advise the visitor of the local immunisation schedules in force.

The school terms, age at entry, and waiting lists vary around the country and may be significantly different from those overseas. A list of schools close to the hospital can be obtained as well as booklets on starting school from the local council or library. If you forward this it will allow visitors to plan schooling for their children and allow such matters as level of schooling

Department of Paediatric Neurology, Hospital For Sick Children
Lindsay J Smith, *honorary senior registrar*

Central Middlesex Hospital, London NW10
Catherine Marraffa, *consultant paediatrician (community)*

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and equivalent academic performance to be sorted out.

Does the hospital have crèche facilities or are there local child minders who can be recommended?

Salary and cost of living

With all the advice you are gathering the important factor that your prospective colleague needs to know is how much he or she can expect to earn and how much it costs to live. With the increasing use of so called soft money for the funding of posts, the salary may be completely unknown. Avoid the embarrassment of your visitor's having to ask how much the salary is by stating it early on. If you will be advising the use of locums at nights or weekends to top up the salary send a set of current rates from both the NHS and a locum agency. Sometimes the locum agency will require a period of employment in the United Kingdom so that local references can be obtained. Inquiry about the likelihood of this in relation to the experience of your visitor can avoid the difficulties of a period without top up funds. If your visitor is coming to an NHS post, letters documenting the years of experience in the particular field should be brought so that the correct grade can be determined.

Remind visitors taking up an NHS post that superannuation will be deducted automatically unless they specifically opt out at the start. It is usual to opt out for short periods of employment in order to free more cash each month.

A list of scholarships that can be applied for before or after arrival as well as some guidelines on application procedures and requirements would be appreciated by your visitor.

Your visitor must obtain a national insurance number as soon as possible: money earned without a national insurance number is not subject to tax relief so that all earnings are taxed at the emergency rate. The visitor should apply in person as soon as possible to the local social security office rather than allow the hospital personnel office to arrange it. The loss of several months of tax relief could be decisive in daily living as well as taking several months or even years to claim back.

The cost of living varies enormously throughout the United Kingdom, and the impression obtained from visiting London can give a worrying, jaundiced view. A simple idea of weekly grocery bills and transport costs is a good basis for your visitor.

Banking

Given that you have found the funding and somewhere to house your visitor, the handling of money should present no problem. However, the high street banks are notoriously reserved about opening accounts and granting cheque guarantee cards and automated teller machine cards (for example, cashpoint cards) because of the lack of a credit history in the United Kingdom. Ensure that your visitor brings a letter of reference from his or her own bank. You may need to provide a covering letter explaining the doctor's appointment. Having to go to the local branch during working hours to get money for six months can place a severe strain on productivity. An easy way of bringing money into the country is a small amount of cash and a personal cheque in pounds sterling drawn in the doctor's name. This will be cleared in a few days, whereas foreign currency drafts may take several weeks, placing a strain on resources.

Staying on

Depending on the origin and family background of your visitor, various visas will be required by the Home Office to allow a visitor to work. The most common is a postgraduate visa that allows the recipient and family to stay for up to four years. These are currently the last bastion of sexism, in that if a woman is granted the visa her husband is not allowed to work at all. The wife of a postgraduate husband is allowed to do any work, so check on the family plans. Having a husband at home all day unable to work can generate a lot of tension.

You should document the duration of the post at the outset and whether an extension is available or likely. Currently health authorities are recommending that no overseas visitor be given a substantive post within the NHS without full evaluation of his or her immigration status.

When visas need to be extended visitors often ask for the day off to go in person to Lunar House in the London Borough of Croydon. Permission should be freely given as the alternative is to send the passport by post and be without it for up to six months while it is processed. It is not a happy situation to be in a foreign country without your passport. The trip to Lunar House will last at least all day, as the Home Office struggles with several hundred personal applications a day. Advise your colleague to go early and take every piece of documentation he or she can think of.

Odds and ends

The weather, a perennial favourite joke, should be taken seriously. An idea of the sort of winter and summer temperatures as well as the sort of clothing that is necessary, especially at the time of arrival, should be sent.

Remember the voltage in most countries is 220-240, but if any equipment is being brought over ensure it can operate on 240 volts.

A list of places of worship around the hospital can save a search on the day.

Remember that letters to some parts of the globe can take several weeks by airmail and the delay should be anticipated. Inclusion of a facsimile number will allow rapid communication.

This may all sound a long and difficult list of things to chase. The temptation is to allow visitors to sort it out when they arrive. A little planning, however, will ensure that they arrive happy and able to give you their best. Another good idea is to invite them to your house after a few weeks: it can be very lonely if you don't know anyone in a new country.

Give the visitor information on the local cost of living. It is easy to be misled by visiting London