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Covid-19: Ministers urged to waive £993 visa bill for “stranded” doctors who had exams cancelled

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Medical bodies have urged the home secretary to extend the visas of around 200 doctors who were left stranded in the UK when the General Medical Council postponed its exams because of the covid-19 pandemic.

The BMA wrote a letter to Priti Patel which was co-signed by the British Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (BAPIO), the Association of Pakistani Physicians of Northern Europe, the Nepalese Doctors Association, the Medical Association of Nigerians Across Great Britain, and the British International Doctors' Association.

The letter said that more than 3000 doctors were waiting to take their second Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB 2) test—the final assessment needed before overseas doctors are granted licence to practise in the UK.

The test was cancelled by the GMC on 4 June because of the inability to provide a safe environment for examinations to take place.

In their letter, the organisations said that BAPIO was aware of 220 doctors who had come to the UK ahead of taking the test and who were now faced with a visa renewal fee of £993 (€1103; \$1230).

“Most of these doctors can ill afford such large sums,” the letter said. “We would urge you to grant a further automatic extension, free of charge, to these doctors until the end of December 2020. This consideration would go a long way to ensuring these doctors are attracted to training and working in the NHS so in the long run such a goodwill gesture will most certainly pay off.”

Chaand Nagpaul, BMA council chair, said the BMA had urged the GMC to resume its exams as soon as possible. “These doctors, clinically qualified, ready and eager to work in the UK, had this one final hurdle before they were able to offer their skills and expertise to the NHS,” he said.

“And with a looming bill of almost £1000 to extend their visas they will not only be disappointed and frustrated, but they will now be incredibly anxious as they face severe financial pressure. Given restrictions on international travel and the high cost of flights, returning home simply will not be an option either.”

Nagpaul added that the Home Office should “do the decent thing” and automatically, without charge, extend the doctors visas.

A spokesperson from the GMC said that they were aware of 240 doctors who are currently in the UK and waiting to sit PLAB 2.

They said that the organisation planned to restart PLAB 2, in a modified form, from August. “In the meantime, we have waived the PLAB 2 fee for the 240 doctors who were stranded in the UK when PLAB 2 was cancelled, as well as waiving the cancellation fee for anyone booked onto either part of our PLAB exams who wishes to cancel because of current circumstances.”

A Home Office spokesperson said, “Right across the immigration system we have taken action to support health and social care workers during the pandemic. We have already extended visas to 31 July 2020 for all foreign nationals who are lawfully in the UK and unable to return home and this is being kept under regular review, but no one will be penalised for circumstances outside of their control.”