Mental health workforce will suffer under Brexit, providers warn

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The BMJ

Mental health service providers have warned that Brexit could prevent them from recruiting the staff they need.

The Mental Health Network, which represents mental health and learning disability service providers in England, said that one in 10 posts in specialist mental health services was currently vacant.

Sean Duggan, chief executive of the network, warned that the situation will get worse if the NHS cannot recruit staff from the European Union after Brexit.

“While we welcome the government’s commitment for an extra 21 000 mental health posts by 2020 [announced in July1], it is vital that the sector can continue to recruit these much needed staff from both EU and non-EU countries post-Brexit,” said Duggan.

He gave the example of the East of England region, where 19% of psychiatry consultants are from the EU or the European Economic Area (EEA). “Imagine the effect on patients if we’re unable to continue this level of recruitment,” he said.

In a January briefing on Brexit the network said that, in the short term, health and social care providers would not be able to recruit the workforce they needed if they were limited to recruiting UK trained staff.2

It added, “Due to the complexity and restrictive nature of the immigration process for non-EEA nationals, meeting the staffing needs of the social care and health sector through non-EEA recruitment is similarly unfeasible in the view of the group.”

The network said that more clarity was needed around what arrangements would be in place for UK providers to recruit EU staff once Britain had left the EU.

The briefing also warned that Brexit could have a negative impact on mental health research because it currently received significant support from EU programmes. Duggan said that stopping mental health research would have an immense impact on patients.

1 Torjesen I. Thousands more mental health posts will be created in England. BMJ 2017;358:j3676. doi:10.1136/bmj.j3676