



# LETTERS

## COVID-19: TESTING AND TRACING

# Covid-19: Contact tracing requires ending the hostile environment

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For contact tracing to be viable, all sections of the community must be willing to be contacted by the NHS or public health staff.<sup>1</sup> The community includes “overseas visitors” on the receiving end of the government’s “hostile environment” policy,<sup>2</sup> who might fear that any contact will incur NHS charges or lead to their being reported to the Home Office.

Unlike the UK, the Irish government has declared that all people—documented or undocumented—can now access healthcare and social services without fear.<sup>3</sup> Undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers in Portugal have been granted the same rights as residents, including access to medical care, in the current state of emergency.<sup>4</sup> In South Korea, undocumented immigrants can be tested without risk of deportation.<sup>5</sup>

It is simply not good enough for the UK to add the novel coronavirus to its list of exemptions from charges,<sup>6</sup> which few people will know. To tackle this epidemic and protect everyone’s health, all barriers to accessing NHS treatment—including charges and reporting of debt to the Home Office—should be suspended immediately.

Competing interests: I am a member of Keep Our NHS Public.

- 1 Pollock AM, Roderick P, Cheng KK, Pankhania B. Covid-19: why is the UK government ignoring WHO’s advice? *BMJ* 2020;368:m128410.1136/bmj.m1284.
- 2 Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. NHS charges to overseas visitors regulations. A statement from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. [https://www.aomrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019-03-14\\_NHS\\_charges\\_overseas\\_visitors\\_regulations.pdf](https://www.aomrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019-03-14_NHS_charges_overseas_visitors_regulations.pdf)
- 3 Houses of the Oireachtas. Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Bill 2020: Committee and Remaining Stages. Seanad Éireann debate. 20 Mar 2020. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/2020-03-20/8/>
- 4 Alberti M, Cotovio V. Portugal gives migrants and asylum seekers full citizenship rights during coronavirus outbreak. 31 Mar 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/30/europe/portugal-migrants-citizenship-rights-coronavirus-intl/index.html>
- 5 <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20200305142400064> (in Korean). Cited in PHM Korea statement on covid-19 outbreak and responses in South Korea. [http://phmovement.or.kr/phm-korea-statement-on-covid-19-outbreak-and-responses-in-south-korea/#\\_ftn27](http://phmovement.or.kr/phm-korea-statement-on-covid-19-outbreak-and-responses-in-south-korea/#_ftn27)
- 6 Department of Health and Social Care. Guidance on implementing the overseas visitor charging regulations. February 2020. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/864481/Guidance\\_on\\_implementing\\_the\\_overseas\\_visitor\\_charging\\_regulations\\_-\\_Feb\\_2020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/864481/Guidance_on_implementing_the_overseas_visitor_charging_regulations_-_Feb_2020.pdf)

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