

Indian nurses in UK could be forced to return home

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London: Over 30,000 nurses from India and other non-European countries employed with Britain's state-funded National Health Service (NHS) could be forced to leave the UK under new immigration rules.

The UK's Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has warned that a new salary threshold of 35,000 pounds a year could hit more than 30,000 nursing staff from non-European nations.

India is the second-largest supplier of nursing staff to the country after the Philippines, with over 15,000 fulfilling nursing shortages within the NHS.

"The immigration rules will cause chaos for the NHS and other care services. At a time when demand is increasing, the UK is perversely making it harder to employ staff from overseas," said RCN general secretary Peter Carter.

The Conservative party led government is planning to introduce new stricter requirements for non-European migrants, including a minimum pay bar for workers which means they would have to leave the UK after six years if they are not earning at least 35,000 pounds per annum.

The cut-off date for the new rules has been set at 2011, meaning the first batch of nurses earning less will be sent home in 2017.

"The UK will be sending away nurses who have contributed to the health service for six years. Losing their skills and knowledge and then having to start the cycle again and recruit to replace them is completely illogical," Dr Carter said.

An NHS staff nurse who trained in Belgaum, Sandeep Duggani, warned that NHS Trusts are continuing their hiring drive in India despite this impending job insecurity.

"I don't think they realise they will have to leave their jobs after six years. It's very sad. I have done all these training courses and now, after six years, I have to go back," 29-year-old Duggani said.

The UK Home Office claims the new rules would help reduce demand for migrant labour.

The move is part of the government's effort to control net migration into Britain but RCN warns that by 2017 more than 3,300 NHS nurses could be affected.

Nurses in the UK on average earn salaries of between 21,000 and 28,000 pounds a year. Due to cuts to nurse-training places, trusts are being forced into relying on overseas recruitment as well as temporary staff.

According to the RCN, the only long-term solution is to train more nurses in the UK, but in the interim, foreign nurses will be required to fill the gap.

Employers had had four years to prepare for the changes, a Home Office spokesperson said, adding "There are exemptions to this threshold where the UK has a shortage".

At the moment nurses are not on that exemption list, but the Home Office has said it was possible they could still be added if evidence showed this was needed.

Under previous immigration rules, there was no income threshold or time limit. The RCN estimates 90% of nurses hired by the NHS from outside Europe will not have hit 35,000 pounds within six years.

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