



## **“We won’t deny health care to asylum seekers”**

### **Statement by NHS Workers against the government’s immigration policies**

As health workers we wish to state our growing concern about the government’s policies against refugees and asylum seekers in this country. The human rights of asylum seekers are being stripped away, to the point that they have almost no rights at all.. The consequences for their physical and psychological well-being, are profound.

#### **Lies and more lies**

We have been lied to about refugees and asylum seekers to the point where their pain and suffering, their dignity and humanity have been completely submerged beneath a tide of misinformation and fear. Asylum seekers are labelled by the press as bogus, benefit cheats, NHS tourists, and scroungers taking council housing and social services from local people. This, combined with increasingly harsh government policy, is having a direct, negative impact on the health on an already weak and vulnerable group of people.

The people we see in our surgeries and hospitals are victims, of war, terror and repression. Instead of being welcomed and assisted they are demonised and attacked by the media and government. Depression, anxiety and agoraphobia are common, caused or aggravated by living in perpetual fear of arrest, detention, dispersal or deportation. Illnesses like hypertension, heart disease, ulcers and diabetes are also made worse. This comes on top of high levels of pre-existing stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

#### **Consider some facts:**

- Poverty is the norm for asylum seekers: they are not allowed to work and receive only 75% of income support.
- Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 allows the government to refuse all benefits to refugees who fail to claim asylum within 3 days of arrival here. Thousands of people have been denied benefits since

section 55 came into force in January 2003. A recent report to the Mayor of London stated that section 55 will lead to destitution on a large scale.

- Doctors are being asked to make professional judgements as to whether asylum seekers are mentally fit to be denied emergency accommodation and food. We are also being asked to check up on everyone's eligibility for NHS treatment. These are totally inappropriate and unethical tasks for clinical staff.
- Government policy also allows refugees to be detained indefinitely without trial. Several people are incarcerated in Belmarsh Prison at present under such conditions, which are known to be particularly damaging to people's mental health. studies indicate 88% of survivors develop PTSD, while severe depression and suicidal behaviour are common.
- Britain is the 4<sup>th</sup> richest nation on earth, and according to the UNHCR hosts about 200,000 refugees, less than 2% of the world's total of 12 million and about 0.3% of the total UK population.
- Pakistan and Iran have over 1.2 million refugees each. Sudan, Zambia, Kenya and Uganda all have more refugees than Britain. Tanzania, one of the poorest countries in the world, has about 700,000 refugees - this is where Blair wants to send asylum seekers from Britain to await the outcome of their applications.
- In December 2003 just over 80,000 asylum seekers were receiving state benefits, compared with 15.5 million Britons; i.e. just over half of one per cent of people claiming benefits were asylum seekers.
- Immigrants contribute *more* than their fair share to the overall wealth of the country. In a parliamentary answer the government stated that in 2001 foreign-born people accounted for around 8% of total UK employment, but accounted for around 10% of UK gross domestic product.

So where is the huge tide of immigrants swamping the country and scrounging off the NHS and other public services?

### **Right to health care**

The right to health care has become the latest casualty in the war against asylum seekers. Press hysteria over this issue has been followed swiftly by government action to curtail asylum seekers' rights to NHS care, and in so doing sacrificing the very ethos of the NHS. On 30.12.03 Health Minister John Hutton announced that "failed" asylum seekers will be denied free NHS care. At least one hospital trust is now asking GPs to help them identify such people in clinical referral letters. This is a clear breach of patient confidentiality and asks doctors to act as immigration officers

### **NHS depends on immigrant workers**

Yet the NHS depends critically on immigrant workers for its survival. We are recruiting large numbers of nurses in particular from abroad yet refugee doctors and nurses for no good reason still find it difficult to get jobs in the NHS. The cooking, cleaning, washing, portering and transport services in the NHS are largely done by immigrant workers, who are willing to accept low pay and poor conditions. Without

immigrants the NHS would literally grind to a halt. Thousands of elderly and disabled Britons are critically dependent on immigrant workers for their care and well-being.

**The real cause of the problems in the NHS**

To blame refugees for problems in the NHS is frankly absurd and demonstrates the depths to which the press and government will sink. The Wanless report found that under-investment in the NHS over the last 25 years, compared to the EU average, amounted to £237 billion. This is why waiting lists are so long and why so many GP surgeries are full and unable to cope.

The myth that refugees get preferential treatment on the NHS is precisely that, a myth. Several studies demonstrate that asylum seekers get fragmented care and have difficulty in accessing services. This is one of a number of areas where doctors and other health staff are being insidiously included in the war on asylum seekers.

**Enough is enough** When the state sanctions suffering and ill-health in this manner we have a duty to speak out. We invite you to:

**Sign MPU's petition**

**Join MPU's campaign**

**Encourage your organisation to distribute the petition**

**If you are a medical student or doctor join MPU**

Further information and copies of our report: 'United Kingdom - a place of refuge?' from: Carol English, National Secretary Medical Practitioners' Union, AMICUS, 40 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3UD [Carol.English@amicustheunion.org](mailto:Carol.English@amicustheunion.org) and at [www.mpunion.org.uk](http://www.mpunion.org.uk).