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## Short Communication

# Public Health England's Migrant Health Guide: an online resource for primary care practitioners

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## ABSTRACT

Approximately 13% of the UK population in 2015 was born overseas. Most migrants have come to the UK to work or study although there has been a small increase in the number of asylum applications in the UK in recent years, reflective of the ongoing humanitarian situation across Europe.

Migrants in the UK tend to be young and healthy, but some may face unique health needs as a result of their experiences before, during and after migration. For these needs to be appropriately recognised and addressed, evidence-based advice is needed for UK professionals.

The Migrant Health Guide is a free online tool for healthcare professionals. It was launched in 2011 and is widely used in the UK and internationally.

It has four sections: 1) Migrants and the NHS—information on access and entitlements to the National Health Service (NHS); 2) Assessing patients—includes a checklist for initial healthcare assessments and advice for patients travelling abroad to visit friends and relatives; 3) Countries—country-specific advice on infectious diseases, women's health and nutritional and metabolic concerns; and 4) Health topics—information about communicable and non-communicable diseases and other health issues.

The guide has undergone an extensive update in 2017. In particular, the pages on mental health and human trafficking have been expanded.

A formal evaluation will obtain feedback on the guide and measure changes in awareness, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and behaviour of end users. Findings will inform future revisions and updates to the guide.

Public Health England's Migrant Health Guide is a valuable resource for healthcare professionals. The relaunched guide builds on the previous version in raising awareness of key issues and providing evidence-based advice to improve the health of migrants and refugees internationally and in the UK.

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## Introduction: current situation and need

Approximately 14% of the UK population in 2016 was born overseas.<sup>1</sup> In addition to more long-term population flows

driven by structural and economic factors, the changes in population composition have been marked by an increase in acute, crisis-driven movement of migrants and refugees in recent years. Asylum applications in the UK from main

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applicants rose by 41% (to 36,465) in the year ending June 2016, compared with those in the previous year.<sup>2</sup> This was the highest number on record since the year ending June 2004 (39,746).<sup>2</sup>

The migrant population in the UK is diverse and comprises people who have migrated for a range of different reasons and with varying histories of migration to the UK. The majority come to work or study, whereas a smaller proportion accompanies family members or comes as refugees and asylum seekers. As of March 2017, 7307 people had been resettled in the UK through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.<sup>3</sup> This scheme primarily resettles displaced refugees who are currently living in camps in countries neighbouring Syria (principally Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon) based on need.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to estimate the number of migrants living in the UK who have arrived through irregular or undocumented channels, but it is thought to be a very small fraction of the overall population.

Although most migrants in the UK are young and healthy,<sup>4</sup> many may have unique health needs depending on their experiences and circumstances before, during and after migration. Before migration, this may include factors relating to education, employment, socio-economic or political circumstances and access to health care in the country of origin. The reasons for migration, along with the migration journey itself, are also important factors likely to impact on an individual's health.<sup>5,6</sup> Someone migrating for work or study is likely to have different health needs compared with somebody who has been trafficked or who is seeking asylum. Conditions in the destination country, such as socio-economic factors and legal status, as well as perceived fears of prejudice and discrimination, may continue to influence health-seeking behaviour and health outcomes long after arrival.<sup>5</sup>

It is important that healthcare professionals are equipped to recognise and respond to the health needs of migrants and their families. Public Health England (PHE) has developed the Migrant Health Guide to support primary care practitioners in providing advice and caring for people who have come to the UK from overseas.

## PHE's Migrant Health Guide

### Overview

The Migrant Health Guide is a free online tool for healthcare professionals. It was launched in 2011 and endorsed by the Royal College of General Practice and the Royal College of Nurses. It has been widely used in the UK and internationally.<sup>1</sup>

The guide has undergone an extensive update in 2017 to incorporate latest figures, guidelines and statistics. It is now accessible via the [GOV.UK](https://gov.uk) website.

<sup>1</sup> Based on personal communication with stakeholders and a previous end-user evaluation of the guide (unpublished report, 2012). A comprehensive evaluation of the relaunched guide is planned.

### Aim and purpose of the guide

The guide is designed to support primary care practitioners in providing advice and caring for people who have come to the UK from overseas.

It aims to demystify policy around access and entitlements to NHS services, provides helpful advice for assessing the health of new migrants and those who may be visiting friends and relatives overseas and offers detailed information about countries of origin and relevant health issues.

### Taking a closer look

The guide has four sections:

#### 1) Migrants and the NHS

Many migrants will come from countries with very different healthcare systems to the UK. This section provides information on migrants' access and entitlements to NHS services. It can help guide practitioners in explaining to new patients how the NHS operates and how this compares with the health system which they may be used to. In particular, the section highlights which services are free to all and which groups of people are exempt from charge, such as refugees and asylum seekers. It also explains NHS guidance on access to general practice (GP) services and specific policies, for instance that a practice cannot refuse to register a patient on the basis that they do not have identification or proof of address. Links to helpful resources are provided, including videos about how to use the NHS in England, which are available in a range of languages.

#### 2) Assessing patients

When assessing new patients, in addition to the basic new patient check,<sup>7</sup> it is important to consider a person's previous life experiences, the circumstances of migration and how long they have been in the UK. This section of the guide provides a helpful checklist of questions to consider when speaking to new migrant patients ([Box 1](#)).

Many cases of travel-associated infections occur among people who travel to visit friends and relatives (VFR) from their country of origin. For example, in 2016, there were 1618 cases of malaria (6 deaths) reported in the UK. Of the 893 cases in 2016 where reason for travel was known, 712 cases (80%) were in VFR travellers<sup>8</sup>.

VFR travellers have a different risk profile to other types of travellers: they tend to travel for longer, live as part of the community while overseas, and are less likely to seek health advice before travel as the destination may be familiar to them. This may be because they do not perceive themselves to be at risk: among cases of malaria in 2016 who had travelled abroad from the UK and where a history of chemoprophylaxis was known (731), 83% did not take anti-malarial medication.<sup>8</sup>

The information in this section supports practitioners in offering guidance to people and patients with close links to friends and relatives living overseas.

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