

‘Health tourism’ in the UK: Challenging negative beliefs affecting the healthcare rights of migrants living with HIV

Background

Migration remains one of the most debated issues in UK politics. Allegations have been made about health tourism to the UK, generally, and in relation to HIV. As part of our research speaking to people born abroad and living with HIV, we were able to test this assumption and ascertain whether any evidence supported this perception.

Method

We utilised a peer-led research design model, where in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 22 people across gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and who were all born abroad and live with HIV in the UK. We also drew upon data by Public Health England (PHE), feedback from two focus groups held with migrants, an external advisory group, and a wider stakeholder roundtable.

Lessons Learned

We found no evidence to demonstrate that HIV health tourism to the UK exists. Among interview and focus group participants, there was low, or no awareness of HIV care available to migrants in the UK before they travelled. Additionally, data by PHE showed most migrants diagnosed with HIV in 2019 were diagnosed for the first time in the UK (61%), meaning they either did not have, or knew they had, HIV when they arrived.

Our research identified that even among those who were aware of their HIV status when they arrived in the UK, there was no evidence to suggest that their motivation for migrating to the UK was to receive HIV treatment. In fact, many avoided HIV care on the assumption it was chargeable, with some participants bringing substantial supplies of HIV medications with them. Others were unaware of the modern realities of HIV as a treatable condition.



Conclusions

The myth of health tourism is used to refuse healthcare rights and access of migrants in the UK. There is little evidence of HIV health tourism existing, but the continuation of such narratives in the political discourse has a damaging impact on migrants living with, or at risk of HIV, and broader public health outcomes. Therefore, any claims about HIV health tourism in the political arena and the media should be consistently challenged.

