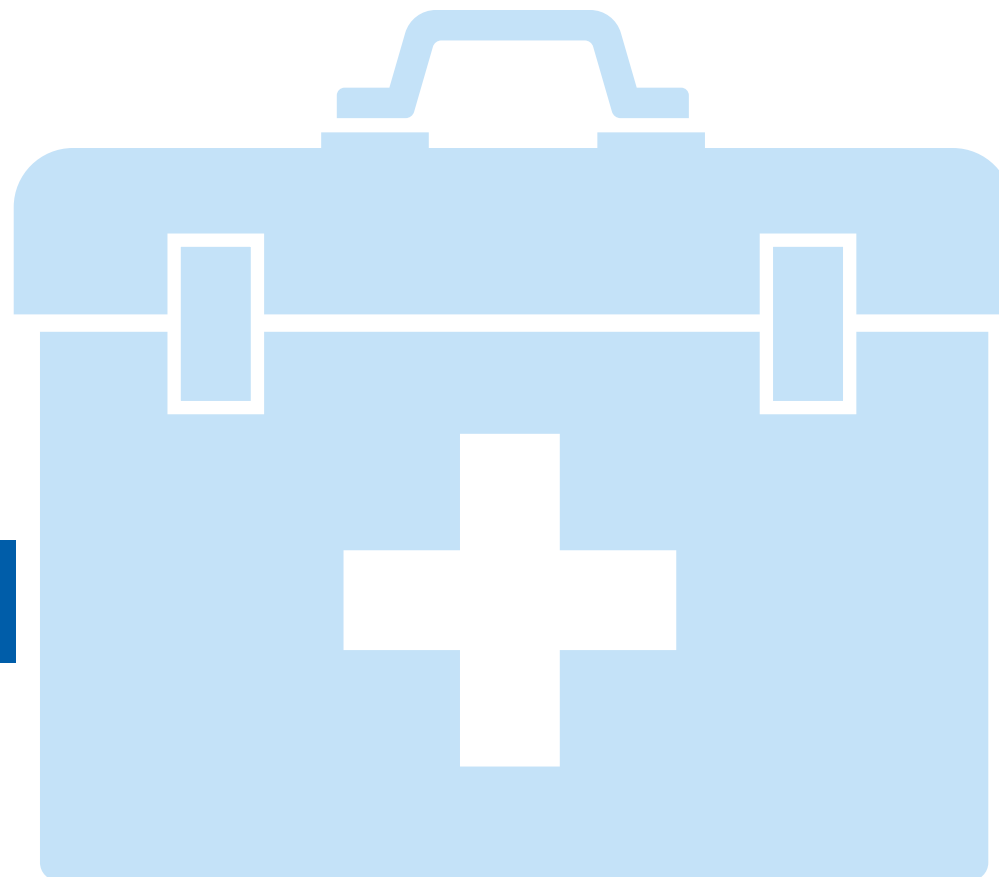




Safe Surgeries Toolkit



How to make your GP practice safe for everyone

This is a toolkit for healthcare professionals and GP practices who want to provide confidential and welcoming services for all their patients including refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. This advice complies with NHS England guidance on GP registration¹ and NHS guidance on secondary care.² Taking the suggested steps in this guide will also help GP practices demonstrate to the CQC that their service is responsive to patient's needs.

What's the problem?

The government is using NHS patients' personal information for immigration enforcement

The Home Office, the government department in charge of immigration, has permission to access NHS Digital records of a patient's last known address, date of birth, GP's details and the date registered with a GP.³ They can use this information to trace patients, which can result in patients' homes being raided, sometimes leading to them being detained and deported.

This prevents the NHS from being safe and confidential. And it goes against GMC guidance

This sort of information-sharing threatens patient confidentiality, a core tenet of the NHS, and undermines the doctor-patient relationship. The General Medical Council (GMC) only permits clinicians to share patient information, unless instructed by the court, when there is a risk of death or serious harm, there is a risk to public health or when a public interest test on the individual circumstances has been carried out. Immigration offences do not present a risk of death or serious harm and there is no case-by-case assessment of the public interest.⁴

It makes vulnerable people too scared to see a doctor

Deterring refugees, asylum seekers, victims of trafficking, and other vulnerable people from getting healthcare has serious health consequences. At Doctors of the World's clinics, we regularly see pregnant women avoiding antenatal care, as well as cancer sufferers and parents with unwell children who are afraid to see a doctor. Ten per cent of our patients already do not access NHS services because they fear arrest.⁵ We fear this will now get worse.

The NHS becomes less efficient and our communities become less healthy

Patients who don't have a GP are more likely to end up going straight to A&E and to leave conditions until they are more advanced and more expensive to treat. And, of course, when more people are treated for illnesses, society becomes healthier for everyone. The patient information that doctors and healthcare staff input into their database in good faith is, ultimately, proving detrimental to people's wellbeing.

How can I take a stand against this?

Any information recorded on the NHS spine may be shared with the Home Office without a GP practice's consent. But you can take concrete steps to stop a patient's address being shared and to make them feel welcome.



Step 1

Make sure patients know they don't need to give a personal address

Step 2

Display a poster declaring your surgery a safe space

Step 3

Never ask to see a passport, visa or identity document

Step 4

Don't ask for proof of address documents

Step 5

Make sure frontline staff know the rules

Step 6

Check your registration policy



Step 1

Make sure patients know they don't need to give a personal address

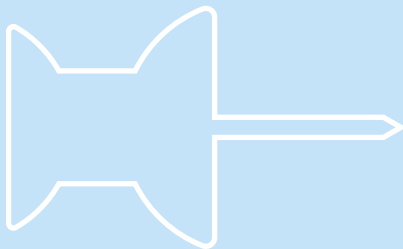
Undocumented migrants and refused asylum seekers may be afraid to provide their home address when registering at a doctor's surgery, fearing (with good reason) that it could be used by the Home Office to trace them. You can make it clear to patients they can register without handing over their home address. NHS guidance says "the practice may use the practice address to register them if they wish."⁶ Or a patient could use a local day centre, migrant support group or community support group as a c/o address.



Step 2

Display a poster declaring your surgery a safe space

It's important that you have a sign on display that clearly tells patients they do not have to give their home address. Do you have a notice board that patients read? Or is there a space on your registration desk? Putting up a poster where it can clearly be seen could be a good way to make potential new patients feel safe registering at a practice. You can make one yourself or download our ready-made poster [here](#). If you'd like the poster in different languages please email safesurgeries@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk.



Step 3

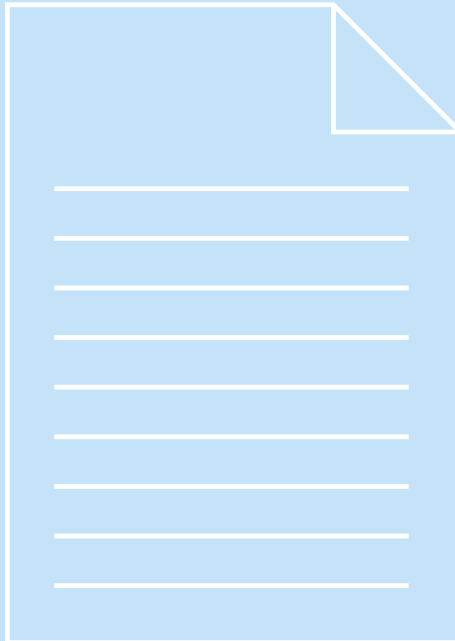
Never ask to see a passport, visa or identity document

Refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, including victims of trafficking often don't have any identity documents. They may have been trafficked to the UK without documents or could have lost documents during a gruelling journey. Frontline staff do not need to see identity documents to be able to register a patient. NHS guidelines clearly state "there is however no contractual requirement to request [proof of ID], nor is establishing an individual's identity the role of General Practice."⁷ However 29 per cent of patients wrongly refused GP registration are turned away for exactly this reason.⁸

There is also no need to include proof of immigration status in the registration process or even to ask questions about immigration status. NHS guidelines clearly state "anybody in England may register and consult with a GP without charge... Therefore, all asylum seekers and refugees, overseas visitors, students, people on work visas and those who are homeless, overseas visitors, whether lawfully in the UK or not, are eligible to register with a GP practice."⁹ People who are undocumented are often deterred from registering when they are asked to prove their immigration status, so it's best not to ask these questions at all.



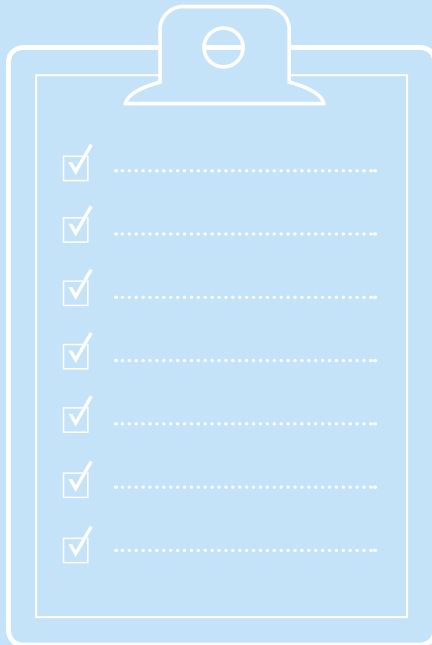
Step 4



Don't ask for proof of address documents

It has become routine at many mainstream doctors surgeries to ask for proof of a patient's address, whether that be a bank statement, tenancy agreement or utility bill. But while most people in the UK have no problems providing some form of address proof, some patients, such as those living in unstable accommodation or those who are street homeless, simply do not have any documents with their name and address on them, meaning they are wrongly refused the healthcare they need. But this is not a required by the NHS with the NHS guidelines clearly stating "there is no regulatory requirement to prove identity, address, immigration status or the provision of an NHS number in order to register."¹⁰ NHS England guidance says "If a patient cannot produce any supportive documentation but states that they reside within the practice boundary then practices should accept the registration." So the simple question "where are you staying at the moment?" is all you need to ask to find out if a patient is living in your catchment area.

Step 5



Make sure frontline staff know the rules

Everyone is entitled to register with a GP regardless of immigration status, but 28 per cent of GP practices get it wrong. One of the biggest barriers refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants face is reception staff who simply do not know how to register them.¹¹ Whether it's refusing to register someone who doesn't have proof of address or ID or staff not having the authority to register patients without paperwork, these can all lead to sick and vulnerable people not getting the healthcare they need. It's important that all frontline staff understand who is entitled to register with the GP practice and how they can support vulnerable patients to register. In your next practice meeting make sure all staff understand the registration policy and what advice to give to patients. Doctors of the World runs free training sessions which involve our experienced trainers coming to your surgery and conducting a workshop with all the practice staff together. You can book a session by emailing safesurgeries@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk.

Step 6

Check your registration policy

If you have a registration policy that asks patients to provide proof of address or proof of ID, the policy also needs to include a way for people without an address or proof of address or ID to register. Make sure your registration policy includes a pathway for those who do not have proof of address/proof of ID or are frightened to give it. You also need to make sure your patient handbook and registration leaflets explain to patients how to register without an address, proof of address or ID.

Here is some suggested wording for your GP practice handbook:

- *The practice complies with NHS England's Standard Operating Principles on GP Registration and recognises everyone living in the UK is entitled to be registered with a GP and to access free primary care.*
- *The practice will only refuse an application if the list is closed; the patient lives outside the practice boundary; or we have other reasonable grounds. Immigration status and inability to provide identification or proof of address will not be considered reasonable grounds to refuse a registration.*
- *If the practice does refuse a patient registration, we will write to the patient explaining why they have been refused within 14 days.*
- *Homeless people and those living in unstable accommodation are entitled to be registered with a GP and will receive the same level of care as those with a permanent address. If patients cannot give an address the practice will help them to register using an alternative address such as the practice or a local organisation.*
- *Refugees, asylum seekers, and refused asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and victims of trafficking are entitled to be registered with a GP and receive free primary care. The practice will support these patients to register if they are unable to provide proof of address and / or identification. Refugees, asylum seekers and victims of trafficking are exempt from all secondary care charges. Undocumented migrants may be charged for secondary care. Where a GP refers a patient for secondary services they will do so on clinical grounds alone; eligibility for free care will be assessed by the receiving organisation.*

Questions?

What if the Home Office contacts us for information about a patient?

If someone working for the Home Office sends you a letter, email, fax or makes a phone call asking for details about a patient, make sure all practice staff know not to give any information without discussing with the GP responsible for the patient's care. As a GP you are not under any legal obligation to provide information requested by the Home Office, unless there is a court order, there is a public health risk in not sharing the information or it is in relation to a serious crime. Each request should be considered in accordance with the GMC guidance.¹²

What happens if immigration officers arrive at our GP surgery?

The Home Office can only enter private premises with your permission or if they have a warrant/Assistant Director's letter. No staff member or individual patient is obliged to answer any questions they ask and they are free to leave unless they are arrested.¹²

What about secondary care?

Refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to free secondary care. There are some secondary care services that undocumented migrants may be charged for but all urgent and immediately necessary care must be provided. Where a GP refers a patient for secondary services (hospital or other community services) they should do so on clinical grounds alone; eligibility for free care will be assessed by the receiving organisation. Make sure all practice staff know it's ok to continue to refer all patients for hospital care if they need it.

What should I do if I am worried a patient isn't getting the care they need?

For more information on how to support individual patients contact Doctors of the World's UK programme team on **0207 078 9629** or **clinic@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk**.

What is:

A refugee?

Someone who has a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion,”¹⁴ and the UK government agrees it is not safe for them to return to their country of origin. New refugees often do not have any proof of ID, and they may be living in temporary accommodation or with friends so don’t have proof of address.

An asylum seeker?

Someone who has made a claim for protection on the basis of the Refugee Convention or Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights and is waiting for the outcome of their claim. Asylum seekers often live in temporary accommodation or with friends so don’t have proof of address. They also might not have any proof of ID because it was lost during a gruelling journey or has been sent to the Home Office as part of their asylum application.

A refused asylum seeker?

This is someone whose asylum application has been unsuccessful. Some refused asylum seekers voluntarily return home, others are forcibly returned and for some it is not safe or practical for them to return until conditions in their country change. Many refused asylum seekers are destitute so do not have a fixed address or proof of address. They are at high risk of immigration enforcement and may not want to provide their address.

An undocumented migrant?

This is someone who does not have legal papers to support their presence in the UK. This may include people who have overstayed their visas or entered the country without declaring themselves to the Home Office. Some will be trafficking victims or working in exploitative conditions. It’s very unlikely they will have proof of address or ID. They are at high risk of immigration enforcement and may not want to provide their address.



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