

# Future bleak for Indian docs in UK

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## Controversial New Law Could Make Them 'Illegal Aliens'

By Rashmee Roshan Lal/TNN

**London:** Thousands of Indian doctors in Britain are at risk of becoming "illegal aliens" here with the insidious premature application of a controversial new law on work permits for non-European Union (EU) medical professionals.

The new law, technically meant to come into force in July, will henceforth require non-EU doctors to possess valid British work permits in order to enter the country. The law, which no longer deems it sufficient for non-EU doctors to have passed preliminary British tests like PLAB to certify their competence and expertise, was announced by health minister Lord Warner recently. The minister admitted that the UK had finally realised it must draw on a glut of home-grown and European doctors, instead of filling vacancies with "international" applicants, the majority of whom belong to the Indian sub-continent.

On Monday, Indian doctors across the country reported that the law appears to be "already in use—by the back door" with British hospital trusts using the start date of April 1 to reject South Asian job applicants on



- ▶ 30% of doctors in the UK are South Asian, 40% are foreign
- ▶ UK has an estimated 25,000 Indian doctors
- ▶ Nearly 7,000 non-European doctors rushing to pass PLAB in 2005, up nearly seven times from the 1,000 doctors in 1998

the grounds that they must first look within British or EU medical ranks.

Leading British Indian doctors say the legislative change slams the door shut on both junior and senior Indian doctors, who will no longer be able to enter Britain to work or get hands-on practical training in specialist disciplines or to sit important exams such

as the FRCS or FRCP.

Dr Shiv Pande, who was till recently the head of the 7,000-strong British International Doctors Association (BIDA), criticised the government for dispensing with all notions of "democracy, fairplay, openness and consultation by failing to discuss the intended change with organisations such as BIDA". He said the legal change was sensible only in that it would prevent hundreds of unemployed Indian doctors from starving on the streets here, after sitting expensive PLAB exams to enter the country. He added, "But that does not mean you make it so difficult for all Indian doctors to enter Britain and turn them into illegal aliens".

Doctors say the rule was pushed through so quickly that it puts huge numbers of medical students in a limbo. Dr Ramesh Mehta, consultant paediatrician, and president of the British Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (BAPIO), estimates that there are currently about 15,000 doctors of Indian origin in training posts in the UK. "All these doctors now have uncertain futures and may have to re-turn without completing their training or obtaining a diploma."