

Medical Students Trumped by America's Travel Ban

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Respected Madam,

Through your esteemed journal we want to bring to light the recent problems that are being faced by International Medical Graduates (IMGs) due to the executive order passed by President Trump of the United States of America (USA) on January 27, 2017. It was an act that enforced the suspension of issuance of visas and other immigration benefits to nationals from the countries Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen¹. Extreme vetting was implemented on other Muslim countries, including Pakistan, and we personally know several doctors whose visas were rejected without reason in the period following this order, though this can not be documented.

IMGs made up 24% of the USA physician workforce in 2015². According to another report classifying applicants according to country of origin including the 7 banned countries, published by National Resident Matching Program (NRMP), in 2014 there were 7568 Non-U.S. IMGs in the residency applicant pool of which 44% matched with their choice of programs³. In 2013 alone, a total of 2101 applicants from 11 Muslim majority countries applied for USA-based residency programs and 40% got matched successfully⁴. America has long been a free, educationally stimulating environment, one from which the cream of the developing countries and the citizens of the USA mutually benefit. IMGs applying for a match into their preferred residency

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programs already undergo strict scrutiny due to fierce competition and president Trump's order calling for extreme vetting of immigrants from Muslim countries only makes it further difficult for these physicians who score as good as USA applicants on their United States Medical Licensing Examinations (USMLEs), to pursue their career goals. Several citizens protested nationwide after this ban was imposed to lash out against this prejudice against Muslim states and how it would deprive America of the contributions of the immigrant population including the thousands of healthcare professionals that immigrate to the USA.

There is currently a deficit of 8200 primary care doctors and 2800 psychiatrists in the USA; an estimated shortage of 94700 doctors is expected by 2025⁵. The ban will force IMGs to turn towards other hospitable countries such as Canada and UK as difficulties in obtaining a visa will precipitate doubt amongst residency programs about hiring immigrants. With the match day being so close at March 17th, 2017, the executive order is taking its toll on the mental health of these young physicians leading to anxiety and depression in those who have spent months preparing for this big day. Most of these doctors work under the J-1 visa waiver wherein they have to practice in rural or medically-underserved areas for 3 years. American Medical Association (AMA) has written a letter to Trump addressing the distress and future implications of this order on the healthcare system of the USA, highlighting the negative impact it can have on patient access to care in poor, underserved communities⁶.

As medical students ourselves, we are supposed to undertake electives in our final year, as U.S. clinical experience (USCE) is preferred and even required by some programs in order to match.

But the imposition of this ban and extreme vetting of visas has drastically decreased our hopes of being accepted for placements. We are experiencing a lack of response from hospital-based programs and doctors alike, including the US Embassy, who are undoubtedly unsure of how much an acceptance could help if Pakistan is placed on the ban-list, as it was rumoured. The emotional and mental turmoil we henceforth went through continues to affect our mental peace and studies, being faced with the actual possibility that a residency in the most sought-after programs in the world might be totally inaccessible to us.

Recent news states that the court appeals has rebuffed President Trump's travel ban putting a temporary block to this order, but the Supreme Court's decision still remains, and with it hangs the fate of many medical students such as us who have for years prepared themselves for the USMLE and dreamt of a future in the land of opportunity.

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