

LETTERS



HIV HEALTH TOURISM

Time to end the political rhetoric on health tourism

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The recent news article that systematically refuted Nigel Farage's allegations of so called HIV health tourism is commendable.¹ It is deeply worrying that as the election debate comes to a climax, false political claims are increasingly made in a vacuum of scientific evidence.

Farage's deliberate inflammatory comments undermine public health efforts to tackle the rising incidence of HIV infections in the UK. Research has shown that most migrants seek HIV testing only after symptom onset.² UKIP's anti-immigrant rhetoric will further stigmatise migrants at a time when we desperately need to increase rates of diagnosis.

The article correctly questions the evidence for HIV health tourism. We would argue that the entire premise of health tourism is unfounded. The current government has been "unable to estimate" the number of health tourists entering the UK, instead basing its figures on an absurd theoretical calculation.³ Evidence of health tourism from the front line is equally lacking: Doctors of the World reported that only 1.6% of migrants at its London clinic left their country for health reasons; most are here to work, study, or escape persecution.⁴

Despite a clear lack of evidence, health tourism continues to be used for political gain by all major political parties. In recent decades both Labour and Conservative governments have

exploited public concerns to justify the introduction of NHS charges for vulnerable migrants. Indeed the Immigration Act 2014 laid the legal foundations for restricting access to health services for anyone without indefinite leave to remain.

Farage's recent unfounded comments will have long term consequences for public health. Migrants remain indispensable to society, with a net contribution to the UK economy through skilled employment and tax contributions. The NHS faces far bigger problems than that of health tourism: it is time to end the political rhetoric.

Competing interests: None declared.

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- 2 House of Commons Health Committee. New developments in sexual health and HIV/AIDS policy. House of Commons, 2005.
- 3 Prederi. Quantitative assessment of visitor and migrant use of the NHS in England: exploring the data. 2013. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251909/Quantitative_Assessment_of_Visitor_and_Migrant_Use_of_the_NHS_in_England_-_Exploring_the_Data_-_FULL_REPORT.pdf.
- 4 Doctors of the World UK. The truth about "health tourism." 2014. <http://doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/blog/entry/the-truth-about-health-tourism>.

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