SAFE SURGERIES TOOLKIT

7 STEPS TO HELP MAKE YOUR GENERAL PRACTICE SAFE FOR EVERYONE

THIS RESOURCE IS ENDORSED BY

Royal College of Nursing

BMA

Royal College of General Practitioners

SAFE SURGERIES

This toolkit is a resource for general practices who want to provide a welcoming environment for everyone in their community and an equitable service for all of their patients. It has been developed by Doctors of the World (DoTW) UK with the aim of addressing barriers to primary care and GP registration faced by inclusion health groups, aligning with Core20PLUS5 and the NHS England **national framework for action on inclusion health**.

All of the advice given in this toolkit complies with **NHS England guidance**. Taking the steps suggested also helps ensure that practices uphold their patients' human right to health, protected by international law and reflected in the Care Quality Commission (CQC)'s **Equity in access statement**.

WHY SAFE SURGERIES?

Everyone living in the UK is entitled to register and consult with a General Practitioner (GP) without charge. It means we can prevent and treat illness early and create a healthier society for everyone.

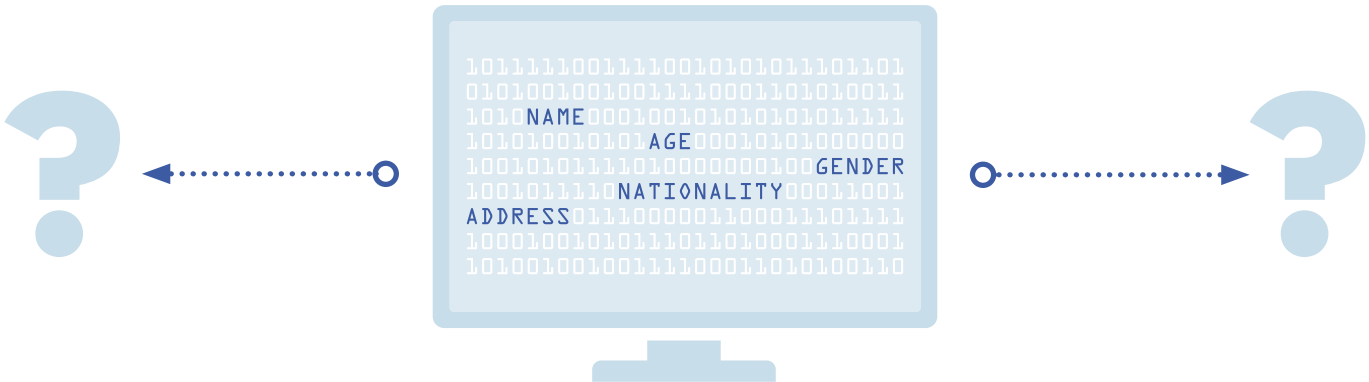
At our UK clinics, DoTW UK helps almost 2,000 people every year who have been unable to access NHS services.

On average, our patients have been in the UK almost 6 years, without ever having seen a General Practitioner. Most of these are migrants in vulnerable circumstances, who are often prevented from registering with a GP practice by administrative, language or other barriers.

They include pregnant women, people who have fled war and persecution, and survivors of trafficking and torture, who are often unable to get the healthcare they need.

DoTW UK has developed a range of practical materials to support staff in general practices – including doctors, nurses, non-clinical staff and other professionals who are often the first point of contact for new patients – in becoming Safe Surgeries.

For more information and to join the Safe Surgeries community, visit **www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/safesurgeries**



WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

General practices can take concrete steps, both at reception and during consultations, to improve equity of access to their services.

1. Don't insist on proof of address documents
2. Don't insist on proof of identification
3. Never ask to see a visa or proof of immigration status
4. Do what you can to protect patient information
5. Use an interpreter, if needed
6. Display posters to reassure patients that your surgery is a safe space
7. Empower frontline staff with training and an inclusive registration policy

STEP 1



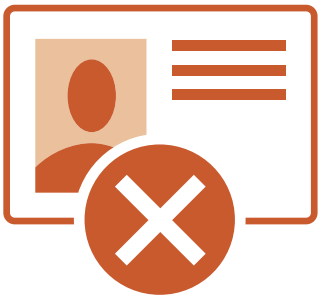
Don't insist on proof of address documents

While most people have no problems providing proof of address, some people, such as those living in unstable accommodation or those who are experiencing street homelessness, do not have any documents with their name and address on.

Unfortunately, many general practices wrongfully refuse to register patients without proof of address – it is one of the most common reasons that our patients are turned away. NHS England guidance states that if a patient says that they live in the practice area but cannot produce proof, they shouldn't be refused registration on that basis.

The practice address or a 'care of' address can be used to register people without a fixed address (rather than writing no fixed abode). Practices should try to ensure they have a way of contacting the patient if they need to (for example with test results).

STEP 2



Don't insist on proof of identification

While many people carry some form of proof of identity, many people in vulnerable circumstances don't have any ID. This can include British citizens, but particularly applies to migrants. They may have been trafficked into the UK without documents, lost them during a long journey or have sent them to the Home Office as part of an immigration or asylum application.

Most general practices ask for proof of identity when registering a new patient and many turn away patients if they can't provide it. However, NHS guidance is clear that, like with proof of address, no patient should be refused registration because they don't have ID and there is no contractual requirement for general practices to verify identity.

Patients also do not need an NHS number to register. In some cases, new migrants may already have been allocated an NHS number without being aware of it, so checking the Spine can help ensure continuity of care and prevent duplication of records.

STEP 3



Never ask to see a visa or proof of immigration status

Everyone in England, regardless of their immigration status is entitled to free primary care and to register with a GP practice. A patient does not need to be 'ordinarily resident' in the country to be eligible for NHS primary medical services – this only applies to secondary (hospital) care.

When registering a patient, don't ask about their immigration status or to see proof of it. This is not needed for registration and asking for it might intimidate or discourage some patients. NHS England's form for registering new patients (the new PMS1 form) includes questions for 'patients from abroad' (section 6). This section is optional, Practice staff should not ask for any documentation to prove the information the patient provides, and responses do not affect patients' entitlement to access primary care services.

STEP 4



Do what you can to protect patient information

Some migrants may be afraid to share their home address or immigration status when registering with a general practice, fearing that it could be used by the Home Office to track them down. There is good reason for this: primary care records were previously used for immigration enforcement without patient or General Practitioner knowledge or consent. While this policy has changed, data sharing can still take place if patients access secondary care and there are no legal safeguards against non-clinical information being shared with immigration enforcement.

If a patient is concerned about this, you should register them with an alternative address; this could be the practice address, or the address of a mosque, church or community centre where post might reach them. In doing this, you are not breaching any NHS guidance or regulations.

If the Home Office contacts you about a patient, you are under no legal obligations to share information. You should only do so if there is a court order, a public health risk or it's in relation to a serious crime (immigration offences aren't serious crimes).

STEP 5



Use an interpreter, if needed

If a patient has difficulty communicating in English, an interpreter should be used both at reception and in consultations. Easy access to telephone interpretation services is therefore essential. Interpreting services are commissioned locally via your integrated care board (ICB) and it is useful to be aware of these arrangements. If the patient is accompanied by an English-speaking friend or relative, consider carefully whether allowing them to join a consultation might prevent the patient from speaking openly. Children should never be used as interpreters.

STEP 6

Display posters to reassure patients that your surgery is a safe space

Having our **Safe Surgeries posters** on display in your waiting area is an easy way to let patients know that your practice is a safe space. As many migrants are not aware of their healthcare entitlements, our posters are also a useful educational tool. They are available in a number of languages, so choose the languages most common to your area. If we don't offer languages you need, email **safesurgeries@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk**. We'll see what we can do!

It is also helpful to have translated information on other health topics available for patients – see our **translated resources hub** for leaflets, posters and videos on health entitlement and navigating NHS services.

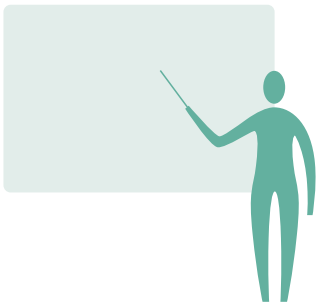


STEP 7

Empower frontline staff with training and an inclusive registration policy

Becoming a Safe Surgery might mean making practice-wide changes to ensure that policy and staff skills support the above Steps. Practices should ensure equitable access for all patients wishing to register. Registration must be available daily during advertised hours, both via paper and online. Patients should be informed of all registration options.

If your registration policy involves asking new patients for proof of address or ID, it also needs to include a pathway for those who do not have these documents or are frightened to give them. See our **template registration policy** for Safe Surgery practices. Our **poster for reception staff** is also a helpful resource to support staff and ensure that the practice complies with NHS guidance. Safe Surgeries training can also help clinical and non-clinical staff understand healthcare entitlement and how they can support patients in vulnerable circumstances. For more information, email **safesurgeries@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk**.



QUESTIONS

Temporary or permanent registration?

Patients should be offered the option to register as a temporary resident if they will be residing in the practice area for more than 24 hours but less than three months. In some instances, a prospective patient may be uncertain about how long they will stay, such as destitute asylum seekers placed in temporary 'initial' accommodation by the Home Office, who are often there for extended periods while awaiting their asylum decision. In situations where the length of stay is uncertain but is expected to be months rather than weeks, NHS England recommends registering the patient as a permanent patient.

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

If someone working for the Home Office contacts you for details about a patient, ensure that no information is given without first discussing it with the patient's GP. General practices are under no legal obligation to provide information to the Home Office, unless there is a court order, a public health risk or it is in relation to a serious crime (murder, manslaughter or rape). Immigration offences are not considered serious crime. Consideration of any request should be informed by the General Medical Council (GMC) and the Nursing and Midwifery Council code of practice (NMC) confidentiality guidance.

What if a patient needs a referral to secondary care?

In England, some migrants, including refused asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, will be charged for secondary care (hospital or community services). While it's important that GPs make referrals on clinical grounds alone (eligibility for free care will be assessed by the receiving organisation) it can be helpful to understand charges they're likely to face.

Refugees, asylum seekers and survivors of trafficking are entitled to free secondary care. So are survivors of torture, female genital mutilation, and domestic or sexual violence, if their treatment relates to their experience of violence. Some services are free for everyone, including treatment given in A&E, diagnosis and treatment of specific infectious diseases, and contraception.

All urgent and immediately necessary treatment must be provided even if a patient can't pay; it will be billed for later.

Maternity care is always considered immediately necessary. The charging rules are complex; for more information, have a look at our resources on the next page.

What if I'm worried a patient isn't getting the care they need?

For more information on how to support individual patients, contact the DoTW UK clinic.

We run a drop-in clinic and national advice line for people who are having difficulty accessing the healthcare they need.

Key guidance

NHS England Standard Operating Principles on GP Registration, Primary Care Policy and Guidance manual (Section 4: GP patient registration standard operating principles for primary medical services)

Care Quality Commission (CQC) guidance on refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants

British Medical Association (BMA) guidance on patient registration

British Medical Association (BMA) refugee and asylum seeker patient health toolkit

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This resource was developed by Doctors of the World staff and volunteers (including doctors and nurses). By design, Safe Surgeries works with primary care to improve the quality of services for vulnerable groups.

DoTW UK resources

All Safe Surgeries resources can be found here.

- Access to healthcare for people seeking asylum: toolkit for primary care commissioners and providers
- Quality Improvement Project (QIP) template for GP trainees
- Translated patient questionnaires

Conflict of interests: none

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Please send any feedback on the toolkit to safesurgeries@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk

Join our network of Safe Surgeries

To join our growing network of Safe Surgeries, or for more information and handy resources, visit our website.

Please get in touch if you have any questions about becoming a Safe Surgery or want to support promotion of Safe Surgeries in your area: safesurgeries@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk

Follow us @DOTW_UK

Want to spread the word?

Use our Safe Surgeries peer-to-peer training resources if you're interested in raising awareness in your workplace

SAFE SURGERIES

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