



Guest blog - life as a refugee doctor in the UK

This month our guest blog comes from Dr Helal Attayee, who arrived in the UK as a refugee and has gone through the process of getting the necessary qualifications to work as a doctor in this country.

In Afghanistan, before going to Turkey for Medical education, I worked for an international charity and also for the British Army as a project manager and as an interpreter. My work with these organisations put my family and myself at risk, so I decided it was better to go to Turkey in order to be safe as well as completing my medical qualifications.

I then returned to Afghanistan to work as a doctor once I qualified. I was hoping to one day set up a community clinic with a group of my friends to treat people, especially those who couldn't afford to go to private hospitals. Unfortunately, I soon realised that because of my previous work with the armed forces, I was still a target for those who saw me as helping the 'infidels'. My life was at risk so I fled to the UK and was granted leave to remain.

When I arrived in the UK I began trying to re-qualify as a doctor but it was not easy. I had to pass an extremely challenging English exam, International English Language Testing System (IELTS), before I could do my medical exams, which cost £145 every time I took it. Fortunately, I had the help of the Refugee Council and their Building Bridges partnership, which helps refugee doctors in London to re-qualify. The Refugee Council supported me financially by helping to pay for my IELTS exams and preparing medical classes, which were absolutely essential for passing my GMC Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) exams.

Getting through the IELTS exam was a big barrier for me and it took a while. After I'd passed IELTS, I passed the medical exams – PLAB 1 and PLAB 2 - fairly quickly as I found them much more straightforward. After that I applied for GMC registration and I was officially registered as a doctor in the UK in September 2015.

The next step was to get work experience and familiarise myself with the UK system as things work differently here. For example, back home or in Turkey we didn't use computers nearly as much – we recorded and stored everything by hand.

I did four months of clinical attachments and then got a place on the Clinical Apprenticeship Program Service (CAPS) for refugee doctors. I spent six months, working as a foundation doctor in two different hospital departments; haematology and then A&E. I learned so much; without that experience it would've been very difficult to find a job.

I hadn't expected the requalification process to be this difficult but I've stayed positive throughout it and the support I received from the Refugee Council was invaluable. I'm now working as a Senior House Officer (SHO) in the Stroke and Neurosurgery Unit at Queen's Hospital. Getting my first job was the most beautiful feeling ever and it's a fantastic start for my new career.

I still dream about setting up that clinic in Afghanistan, the Afghan people are very short of healthcare and I want to help them. Unfortunately, it's not safe for me to go back there at the moment but who knows what the future holds.

For now, my aim is to become a consultant cardiologist; it's something I really, really want to do. It'll take time and be hard work but ultimately worth it. We need more senior doctors – both in the UK and Afghanistan - and the more senior I become the more useful I will be. I'm pleased that I'll be able to give back to Britain and hope that I'll be able to give back to Afghanistan in the future. It's important that refugee doctors like me believe in themselves, work hard and persevere – life isn't easy but we shouldn't give up; it's important to follow your dreams.