

## **Report of the meeting on the health service needs of vulnerable migrants held on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> December, Committee Room 10, Palace of Westminster**

The health charity, Medact, as a part of a coalition of voluntary groups, is leading a campaign with the aim to protect the rights of the most vulnerable migrants needing health care. A meeting was held in Parliament on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December, to support the campaign and discuss the potential implications of the government's proposal on the regulation of access to primary care for foreign visitors. A hundred people from different groups, individuals, grass- roots organisations, migrant communities, trade unions, NGOs attended.

The meeting was opened by the chair, **Wayne Farah** from the Newham Primary Care Trust, who thanked the audience for attending and introduced the speakers.

**MP Neil Gerrard**, a long standing campaigner for migrants' rights, kicked off the discussion. Neil noted that the implementation of the government's new proposal will affect many vulnerable migrants, particularly undocumented migrants and refused asylum seekers, who will be denied not only free access to tertiary and secondary care but also to GPs. He stressed the need to take prompt actions both in Parliament and outside in order to reverse this situation and prevent things to get worse. An early day motion, urging the government to ensure everyone free access to NHS services, is currently circulating among MPs, he said, and it's of utter importance to keep on lobbying the ministers in support of the rights of vulnerable migrants. Outside the Parliament, he added, initiatives must be undertaken to make the case broad and get Trade Unions, voluntary sectors organisations, journalists and single individuals on board.

**Dr Sally Hargreaves**, Research Fellow from the International Health Unit, Imperial College explained how the 2004 Act led to the exclusion from free NHS services of patients considered to be not '*lawfully resident*' in the UK - with specific reference to failed asylum seekers and irregular migrants –. She also pointed out that according to a survey carried out by Imperial College, the regulations are being inconsistently interpreted and enforced by NHS trusts, with a lot of discretion left to GPs and NHS staff without measures being taken to adequately prevent discrimination and cope with diversity. Case studies suggest that further restrictions will have a detrimental effect on public health, as infectious diseases, such as TB and HIV, will remain undetected and untreated and will put much more strains on hospitals and accident & emergency department, already over-stretched. Moreover, due to the complete absence of safety net for vulnerable migrants in this country, people unable to pay will be completely excluded from health care services.

**Susan Wright** , Director of Medecin du Monde UK and responsible for Project London, suggested to consider carefully the impact that the new proposal would have on public health and analyse carefully cost, benefit of such a policy. "Communicable diseases don't respect passports", she commented. Implementing the restrictions would mean cutting off the possibility of prevention and early intervention and as a consequence the population will get increasingly ill and much more strains will be put on A & E departments.

**Dr Angela Burnett** , a GP and member of Medact who works with victims of torture, asylum seekers and refugees, expressed her concern over the implication these restrictions will

have on destitute asylum seekers, who already experience deprivation and in most cases suffer from physical and mental problem as a consequence of their status. If the proposal will be implemented these vulnerable people will be denied access to health care and will be left untreated because unable to pay for the services. Their life will be put at risk, the general public health will be compromised and A & E department will become overcrowded.

**Rayah Feldman**, from the *Hackney Refugee & Migrant Support Group* gave a personal account of her experience of working with refugees and people in detention and cited some example of cases of people who were denied access to health care services because they didn't have money enough to pay for them. She pointed out that these policies act as a mirror to the inhumanity of this government and further restrictions on primary care entitlement will bring the already stigmatised treatment of migrants to a head, and express even further their exclusion.

**Muna Yusuf** from the *Manchester Refugee Support Network* noted that the proposal will have severe consequences on the already precarious lives of asylum seekers and refugees and suggested the need for joint actions aiming to advocate for the rights of vulnerable migrants and to raise awareness among the public about their health care conditions.

There were then a number of contributions from the floor. Representatives from different organisations expressed their concern over the new regulation which, as their experience on the ground seems to suggest, will put at risk the life of many vulnerable migrants, such as failed asylum seekers, people in detention and undocumented migrants, making them even more marginalised and excluded from society with no respect for their basic human rights. In addition, it was highlighted that the denial of free access to primary care service would undermine the government targets on public health, with contagious diseases left untreated. All the organisations present agreed on the need to keep on lobbying and campaigning to ensure that things do not get worse and that access to primary care is free for all.

**Conclusion:** The conference was meant to be a starting point for a series of initiatives that will be undertaken during the course of 2008 as a part of the campaign launched by Medact. A response from the government on the details of the new legislation and how it's intended to be implemented is expected for January. The campaign will continue with the specific aim to lobby the government to review the proposal.

*The meeting was sponsored by Medact, JCWI, Medsin, Migrants' Rights Network, Médecins du Monde UK, and the Terrence Higgins Trust*