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Life in the shadows

Failure to tackle the squalid living conditions endured by exploited migrant workers could create a major public health hazard. Mark Gould and Rebecca Wearn report

Mark Gould and Rebecca Wearn

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Unemployed Polish migrant workers at a London station. Photograph: David Levene

They are known as A8s, the 700,000 economic migrants from the eight accession states of eastern Europe, such as Poland, Hungary and Lithuania. They came to the UK to seek their fortune, but for growing numbers of migrants such as Anton and Jerzy, it's going painfully wrong. A confusing and inflexible benefits system and exploitation by cash-in-hand bosses have condemned them to the squalor of a candle-lit, derelict garage - and a serious illness that could kill them and become a serious public health threat.

The A8 nationals can work legally in the UK, but they must register under the government's worker registration scheme (WRS), at a cost of £90. This entitles them to emergency housing benefit, council tax benefit and tax credits, so long as they are working. Only after they have worked for at least 12 months, without a break of more than 30 days, can they claim any other social security benefits.

But growing numbers of A8s live in the cash-in-hand economy and can't prove they qualify for the scheme or can't afford the £90 to register. The rules cannot be bent, it seems, even when they are suffering from tuberculosis, the highly infectious disease for which medication, along with housing, food and clean clothes, can mean the difference between life and death.

Anton and Jerzy have chronic TB. Until they were evicted last week, they lived with two Polish couples in an abandoned garage below a block of flats in east London. They made the place as

comfortable as possible, but the candlesticks and mirror lend a fake-romantic glow to the scene. A mattress is piled with cushions and blankets, and the garage is furnished with a large, cracked mirror, a pair of coach seats, a postcard of Jesus and a glistening silver tiara. The outside world is blocked out with cardboard taped to the windows.

Both men collapsed in the street, coughing up blood, before members of the public called ambulances and forced them to be admitted. Ashamed and desperate, the men are at a loss as to how to get better. Anton, 54, came to London for a three-day trip with friends in 1997, and has been here ever since. He has only been able to get work if he agrees to be paid cash in hand: "I started working for my friend and he kept telling me he would register me, 'next week' he would say, 'next week', but it never happened." Anton has now been homeless for over two years.

There aren't any official figures on numbers of A8 migrants with TB, but homeless workers say cases are on the increase. Figures from the Health Protection Agency show that TB reached an all time low in the UK in 1987, with 5,086 cases. It has increased steadily since then, and 8,496 cases were notified last year.

Tina Harrison, spokeswoman for the charity TB Alert, says the organisation has given emergency grants to 11 people from accession countries who have TB and had no money to pay for accommodation, food or clothing. "London is the only European capital that has seen a steady rise in rates of TB. If we don't treat A8 or failed asylum seekers or other migrants properly, we face a return to levels of infection of Victorian times."

Sue Collinson, a TB case worker at Homerton University Hospital NHS trust, in Hackney, is mounting a legal challenge against Hackney council's refusal to provide Anton and Jerzy with emergency accommodation. While Collinson agrees that treating the homeless is notoriously difficult, she feels that strict adherence to the letter of WRS is signing a death sentence for her patients. "We were treating them for chronic TB and realised that if we discharge them back to the garage the treatment would be ineffective and the others would have become infected. Hackney are abiding by the legislation, but there are human rights issues here. It seems crazy that you have a local community law centre having to fight a local authority in the court because these people are in desperate need."

Crazy costs

Homerton has looked after Anton, Jerzy and others as in-patients but Collinson says this is not a long-term option. "The costs would be crazy - its £350-a-day to keep someone on an NHS ward when that could pay for a council flat for a week. But Hackney refused to rehouse them, saying that they had no duty of care. We kept another on the ward for three months; when we finally got Hackney social services to house him and his partner temporarily under the National Assistance Act 1948, for the duration of TB treatment, it was at a cost of 50 quid a night."

Collinson says Anton and Jerzy are far from unique. "Everywhere we go, we are finding A8 citizens who have sunk out of view of normal society," she says. "Last week I was at a drop-in where half the homeless users are A8s ... Another homeless drop-in, which shows movies in the afternoon, told me that almost all the 15 users were A8s. Wherever in the country there has been an influx of A8s, you will find a similar set of problems."

About a mile away, a large, abandoned housing block is home to 20 A8s, who are squatting. Collinson visited last week and found one man seriously ill. He had a spinal injury, and was admitted to hospital. She is trying to arrange for an "organised eviction", where police, drug, alcohol and health workers can be involved to ensure those in most need get help.

A few miles south, Tony Miller, the director of the Whitechapel Methodist Mission, which has been providing cooked breakfasts, washing facilities and clean clothing to the homeless for over 130 years, says the problem of homeless and unwell A8s is becoming acute. "We have a mobile chest x-ray screening here every six months and it picked up two Lithuanians with TB," he says. "They live in a squat with about 20 or 30 others. Mostly, they can't tell what time of the day it is let alone get to a hospital appointment or a prescription because they use alcohol and whatever else to ease the chest pain. We, as an organisation, can't hold their medications - it would be breaking the law. I give them the drugs myself on my own responsibility. What else can you do?"

Across London, in Westminster, at the Passage, the capital's largest voluntary day centre and a hostel, the chief executive, Sister Ellen Flynn, said the day centre is being used by 78 eastern Europeans who sleep rough. "Only last week we picked three eastern European men off the streets and took them into our hostel to prevent them from dying," she says.

Jill Rutter, an expert in migration at the Institute for Public Policy Research, says regulations around these people are "labyrinthine". "This is exacerbated by the fact that a lot of advice, even written advice used by local authorities as to eligibility for housing or benefits, is confused or wrong," she says. "There are [reciprocal] treaty arrangements for Poles working in the UK and there is also the European convention on social and medical assistance - a lot of people don't know about it and there is lots of misinformation about entitlements for A8s to housing support and healthcare. I think that is something the government have admitted and say they want to clarify."

But many are concerned that the government is keen to restrict foreigners to emergency-only NHS use, which will simply push the TB problem further underground. Ruth Grove-White, policy officer for the Migrant Rights Network says: "Closing down access to public services is a worrying development, and, particularly in terms of TB, has serious public health implications."

Right treatment

Miller says the only solution is to treat the problem as a public health issue, not a migration question. "A8s aren't scroungers coming here nicking our homes and NHS. They came to work. Anyone, regardless of status, should get the right treatment and accommodation until they are cured."

A UK Borders Authority spokeswoman says WRS regulates A8 nationals' access to the labour market and ensures that only those migrants entitled to access benefits can do so. But she adds: "In the year ahead, prior to April 30 2009, the government will consider the future of the WRS."

Hackney council told the Guardian that Anton and Jerzy are in a "difficult situation" and that officials are still assessing their eligibility for help. Meanwhile, they are adrift somewhere in London. Collinson worries that, untreated, they will develop a drug-resistant strain of the disease, which presents a major health hazard to them and to everyone else.

The names of the migrants have been changed.