Alien: The Experience of a Foreign Resident

Jamie Lim, MD

DOI: 10.1542/peds.2020-040576

Journal: Pediatrics

Article Type: Feature—AAP Section on Pediatric Trainees

Citation: Lim J. Alien: the experience of a foreign resident. Pediatrics. 2021; doi: 10.1542/peds.2020-040576

This is a prepublication version of an article that has undergone peer review and been accepted for publication but is not the final version of record. This paper may be cited using the DOI and date of access. This paper may contain information that has errors in facts, figures, and statements, and will be corrected in the final published version. The journal is providing an early version of this article to expedite access to this information. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the editors, and authors are not responsible for inaccurate information and data described in this version.
Alien: The Experience of a Foreign Resident

Jamie Lim, MD¹,²

Affiliations:
1. Boston Medical Center, Department of Pediatrics, 801 Albany St., Boston, MA
2. Boston Children’s Hospital, Department of Pediatrics, 300 Longwood Ave., Boston, MA

Corresponding Author:
Jamie Lim, MD
Department of Pediatrics, Boston Medical Center
801 Albany Street, 2nd Floor, Boston, MA 02119
Email: jamie.lim2@bmc.org
Phone: 857-272-3031

Conflict of Interest Statement: The author has no conflicts of interest relevant to this article to disclose

Funding/Support: None

Acknowledgments
Drs. Tyler Rainer, Brenna Chase, Heather Hsu, and Sarah Wingert for their feedback on the essay. Drs. Catherine Michelson, Theodore Sectish, and Bob Vinci for their unwavering support.

Contributors’ Statement
Dr Lim conceptualized and wrote the manuscript and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of this work.
One night, I woke up in the pitch black to the deafening sound of a detonated bomb. The explosion killed dozens of people and shattered every window in our home, and in the dry heat of that disorienting night, all I sought was safety. I was eleven years old and living in Riyadh at the time, where my family had just relocated for my father's job. That night, our quiet residential compound of mostly non-Saudi nationals was bombed by Islamic extremists against the Westernization of the country. Their message was clear: “We don't want you here.”

Miraculously unharmed, we left the country within days. While grateful for the opportunities to experience different cultures during our frequent moves, I grew distanced from my birth country, Japan. I never lived anywhere long enough to feel like I could call it home. Then, in 2010, I came to the United States for college. Maybe I would find a home here, I hoped.

Over the ensuing decade, as a foreigner, I became versed in the alphabet and number soup of visas upon which my education and career would come to rely: F-1, J-1, OPT, H-1B. My visa status was a source of constant stress. The bureaucracy of the US Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) was difficult to navigate. Worse, at every step of the way, I felt bluntly reminded of my status as deemed by the US Government: officially, an “alien.”

I felt alien when I entered the US and was interrogated by a customs official about why I was here. I felt alien when most residency programs, nervous about the implications of changing immigration policies, were unwilling to sponsor the visa I needed, separating me from my partner for years. I felt alien when processing delays at USCIS left me without work.
authorization, forcing me to sit out the first weeks of intern year.\textsuperscript{2} I have an ever-present anxiety that my life here depends on a 3x5 inch piece of paper glued into my passport, which could be stamped invalid in seconds. I am not alone. Many of my non-citizen peers have expressed similar fears, including the half-dozen in my residency class alone.

In the past year, new federal policies far worsened these fears. In addition to the executive orders issued in early 2020 temporarily restricting new green cards and work visas (and recently extended through the beginning of 2021), several additional proposals jeopardized the ability of non-citizens to legally work.\textsuperscript{3,4,5} Cited as necessary to protect American workers, the policies failed to recognize the contributions that foreigners provide across industries, including in the healthcare field. In particular, they threatened devastating effects on foreign medical trainees like me who rely on one of two important visa programs—the J-1 and H-1B.

The first of these proposals, which came from the Department of Homeland Security in September 2020, limited the duration of validity of certain visa classes, including the J-1 exchange visa—an important program sponsored by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates that grants foreign physicians work authorization for the duration of a training program.\textsuperscript{6} The proposal dictated that those on J-1 visas must apply for an extension every year, with processing times taking five to 19 months. With residency and fellowship contracts issued only months in advance of the start of each new academic year, the proposed change created an impossible timeline for J-1 physicians. The change had implications for the over 12,000 residents and fellows on J-1 visas at 750 teaching hospitals across all 50 states.\textsuperscript{7}
Second, the Department of Labor recently issued a new wage rule increasing the minimum salary required for those on H-1B visas. Under the H-1B program, the other main visa class apart from J-1 through which foreign physicians are granted work authorization, employers are allowed to hire certain “skilled” foreign workers. The new changes dictated that physicians on this visa, regardless of their level of training, be paid a minimum annual salary of over $200,000. Since residents and fellows earn average salaries of $58,000-$77,000, this wage rule would make it infeasible for training programs to afford to hire non-citizen medical school graduates. In 2016 alone, there were over 10,000 H-1B physicians in the United States, many of them trainees.

Although barely acknowledged, the American healthcare system relies heavily on foreign physicians. In 2017, 15% of US medical residents were on visas, including J-1s and H-1Bs. Foreign physicians who remained in the US after their training were also more likely than their American colleagues to work in underserved areas, many of these positions in primary care. Altogether, almost a quarter of all active doctors across the nation were international medical graduates (IMGs). In pediatrics specifically, IMGs made up 23.3% of all pediatricians in 2019. Over three-quarters of these pediatricians were foreign and thus depended on, or found a pathway to citizenship through, one of these visa programs.

Doctors here in the U.S. have privileges that others do not, including a high level of education, a livable income, and access through institutions to reliable legal aid and advice. We are far from the most vulnerable group of immigrants fighting to stay in this country. Still, these latest
policies would affect thousands of foreign physicians whose only goal is to serve their communities. Thus, they ultimately hurt patients—in the midst of an ongoing pandemic.

Fortunately, in part because of advocates including the AAP, these two rules have been suspended—for now. But the fact remains that they are just examples of the quiet but consequential ways in which foreigners are constantly maligned and marginalized in this country. They are manifestations of a wave of xenophobic nationalism that has been growing over the past several years. From the shore, I hear louder and louder echoes of an all too familiar message that has haunted me since childhood: “We don’t want you here.”

The Biden-Harris Administration has signaled a drastically different approach to immigration through their choice of Alejandro Mayorkas to head the Department of Homeland Security, the first-ever immigrant to be nominated to this position. And while the administration’s latest immigration bill demonstrates a more welcoming stance towards immigrants, I urge everyone to pay attention to its details—including around non-immigrant visas like the J-1 and H-1B—as it faces an uphill battle and potential changes in congress. We must remain wary that history has demonstrated that this country has been especially unkind to foreigners and immigrants in times of insecurity and economic hardship. Still, I am hopeful about upcoming change.

My other source of hope remains my residency community, who make me feel valued. While other training programs stopped matching foreign residents with certain visa needs in the setting of the political climate around immigration, mine embraced us because of it. My program
leadership understood the importance of representation, especially in this uncertain time. They knew how much it can mean to families when they tell their doctor, “We are not from here”, and their doctor can reply, “Me too.”

In that shared identity, instead of being made to feel the need to justify their presence—as I have my entire life—a different, warmer, message might come through: “We’re glad you’re here.”

References


Alien: The Experience of a Foreign Resident
Jamie Lim
Pediatrics originally published online April 28, 2021;

Updated Information & Services
including high resolution figures, can be found at:
http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2021/04/26/peds.2020-040576.citation

Permissions & Licensing
Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at:
http://www.aappublications.org/site/misc/Permissions.xhtml

Reprints
Information about ordering reprints can be found online:
http://www.aappublications.org/site/misc/reprints.xhtml
Alien: The Experience of a Foreign Resident
Jamie Lim

*Pediatrics* originally published online April 28, 2021;

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2021/04/26/peds.2020-040576.citation