

Doctor told to seek a factory job

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Saturday Age

Saturday 14th October 2023

662 words

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Not so long ago, Edriss Noorzai was an oncologist, treating patients with cancer in a Kabul hospital.

But when he arrived in Australia from Afghanistan in 2022, he was told by employment agencies that it would be better if his résumé didn't mention he was a specialist doctor.

"Everyone was telling me, 'Don't put these things in your CV. If you put these things in your CV and apply for basic kinds of work, no one will accept you,'" said Noorzai, aged in his 30s. "Some people were telling me to go to other fields, like construction or factories."

It was a similar experience for Faisal Ahady, a father of three who pursued his childhood dream to become a doctor.

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, the work he had done with the Australian government and other international projects made him a target. He was offered a temporary visa in Australia, along with his family.

Still, the employment agencies in Australia also advised Ahady that he should remove his medical qualifications from his résumé and perhaps apply for administration work, which he was also skilled in.

Dr Karen Dunwoodie, the director of the Deakin Centre for Refugee Employment, Advocacy, Training and Education (CREATE), said she had heard similar accounts from other highly skilled arrivals from places upended by conflict and crisis such as Afghanistan, Ukraine, Venezuela, Syria, Iran and Iraq.

And it's not just doctors being told to downplay their skills, but also

former lawyers, judges, dentists, journalists, museum curators, academics, architects, engineers and senior bureaucrats.

Dunwoodie believes people were swayed to take their professional qualifications off their résumé and seek lower-skilled work to appeal to employment agencies focused on targets for the number people they got into work. There was less focus on matching people with their skills.

"It's much easier to find work in low-skilled work, rather than spending the time and resources to assist someone who is highly qualified."

Dunwoodie said highly skilled refugee women found it particularly difficult, and were usually funnelled into jobs in childcare, aged care, hospitality and cleaning "with little acknowledgment of their previous experience".

Some people were also advised to change or anglicise their name to make them sound less foreign, she said.

Ukrainian Olga Hurina, 42, moved to Perth in March last year as a refugee after the Russian invasion. Her husband remains in Ukraine.

Before the war, Hurina had a successful legal career, working as a manager at the National Agency on Corruption Prevention. But she said the employment agencies she first dealt with in Australia were not equipped to find jobs for people with her skills.

"Their purpose is to find a very simple job for people, and I think they have difficulty with cases like me," she said.

Dunwoodie said governments, employers and universities needed to work together to find better

solutions to the underemployment of highly qualified new arrivals to Australia.

CREATE – founded in 2019 – has been bridging the gap for hundreds of new arrivals with professional qualifications, providing career clinics and one-on-one mentoring to help people find meaningful work that matches their experience.

Through a CREATE women's career clinic and a course with the Adult Migrant English Program at TAFE, Hurina said she improved her résumé and found work as a compliance analyst.

CREATE also helped Noorzai and Ahady secure hospital jobs at Peninsula Health in Melbourne, keeping them employed in the sector while they go through the arduous process of having their qualifications recognised locally.

Noorzai said at first it was stressful thinking he would have to start "everything from the beginning again," but he has passed his first Australian Medical Council exam, paving the way to be again registered as a doctor, an important first step in his goal to again practise as an oncologist.



Health editor

Doctors Faisal Ahady (left) and Edriss Noorzai at the Frankston Hospital. Photo: Eddie Jim