

What We Have Learned From Filipino Nurses^a

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THE EISEI HOSPITAL WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1961. It is located in Hachioji, a suburban area of Tokyo. It is one of the city's major community hospitals, which extends healthcare services for emergency cases, acute and chronic settings, and rehabilitation. The hospital belongs to the Eisei-kai Group, which has emergency hospitals, long-term care facilities for the elderly, and group homes for dementia patients. The Eisei-kai Group also provides home visits. With a total bed capacity of 1,046, the company is employing 1,500 staff. It is going to start operating its third long-term care facility in March 2013.

Figure 1 was taken on the day the first economic partnership agreement (EPA) nurses from the Philippines came to the Eisei Hospital in 2009. Indonesian EPA nurses, who had been with us for one year, also welcomed them.

I think it is crucial that Japan accept foreigners to overcome the labor shortage caused by the aging society and the decreasing younger population. For your reference, the total population of Japan is 126 million. Its labor population is 65 million while foreign residents are two million, which is about three percent of Japan's labor population.

Under the bilateral Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), Japan has been accepting Indonesian nurses since 2008 and Filipino nurses since 2009. The program for Vietnamese nurses will start in 2014. The EPA programs give foreign nurses and caregivers the opportunity to acquire professional licenses in Japan while receiving an on-the-job training at hospitals and care facilities in the country. To the Japanese government,

^a Delivered at an international symposium, "Migration of Filipino Nurses under the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA): Trends and Challenges" held at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman on 24 January 2013.

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FIGURE 1
The first day at the Eisei Hospital



the EPA on foreign health professionals is just one of the economic activities between the two countries and is not intended to address the labor shortage in the country. However, the institutions that accept EPA candidates see the program as a means to solving the labor shortage problem. There is such a gap in perception between the Japanese government and the receiving institutions.

It is extremely challenging for EPA nurse candidates to pass the National Board of Examination for Nurses of Japan within three to four years. The latest [2012] passing rate of EPA nurse candidates was 11 percent, while that of the entire examinees, majority of whom were Japanese, was 90.1 percent.¹

As a solution, the training period was extended for qualified candidates for one year in 2013 in order to improve the passing rate in the National Board Examination.²

So far, the Japanese government has done the following measures to improve the foreigners' chances of passing the National Board Examination for Nurses: using simpler and clearer sentence structures in which the subject and the verb are indicated clearly; providing a phonetic guide to some complicated *kanji* (Chinese characters); and providing an English translation of medical terms. From 2013, the examination hour will be extended by 30 percent, and a phonetic guide will be provided to all kanjis. These are aimed at raising the passing rate of foreign nurses in the examination.

In case of failure in the National Board Examination, a special consideration is given to qualified candidates so that their stay, although subject to certain conditions, can be extended. These conditions are as follows: the candidate expresses his/her will to strive to pass the National Board Examination in the following year; the institution that accepted him/her presents a training plan in accordance with the candidate's individual needs; and the candidate must have earned the required points in the National Board Examination for Nurses—that is, in the latest examination, 102 points or more out of 300 points.³

Some candidates have returned to their home countries before the expiration of the period they are allowed to stay. The reasons include marriage, caring for a sick family member, a gap between expectations and reality, human relationships, or difficulty of the National Board Examination. The problem of learning the Japanese language matters to a great extent.

I have conducted interviews with some returnees in the Philippines and Indonesia to know about their situation after their return. It was revealed that they still hope to go back to Japan to take the National Board Examination again. However, they find their current situation not conducive to reviewing for the nursing board exam, and they have scarce financial resource for travel to Japan—hence, they wish to take the examination in their own home country. I believe it is necessary to think seriously how the government, or we ourselves, can support them.⁴

The Eisei Hospital has been accepting foreign medical staff since 2004, even before the EPA programs started. At present [January 2013], eight Filipinos, three Indonesians, and three Chinese nationals are working at our hospital. Two of them—one Filipino and one Indonesian—passed Japan's National Board Examination for Nurses ~~on~~ in March 2012.

When receiving foreign medical staff, resources such as budget, time, and personnel—are necessary. Why do you think some institutions still accept foreign medical staff despite such costs? It is because receiving foreign nurses under an EPA is Japan's first endeavor to do so in an official framework. Therefore, I believe it is essential that receiving hospital institutions cooperate with the government in implementing its policy by giving feedback on what is beneficial and what is problematic to help improve the EPA. In the coming years and decades in Japan, labor shortage is anticipated as a result of an aging population and a low birth rate. We cannot just ask somebody to fill the gaps of the labor shortage without any preparations. It is therefore necessary to train foreign nurses with the prospect of meeting this challenge in the next five to ten years. It is also important for foreign nurses to take part in international exchange and obtain knowledge about Japan. As such, it is very challenging to receive foreign nurses in hospitals in Japan. Nonetheless, I would like to stress that the hospitals themselves can also learn from the program. For instance, the determination of the foreign nurses who had no knowledge of the Japanese language and culture to overcome language barrier and challenges in the work place, learn the Japanese culture, and study hard to obtain the national license has impressed the Japanese medical staff. They inspire the Japanese staff to become motivated and do their best, too. Their presence has energized the whole workplace.

I believe it is important that institutions, when receiving foreign medical staff, understand the needs of the latter. It is important that the management, medical staff members, patients, clients, their families, and the community members cooperate with and understand foreigners who are not yet familiar with the Japanese lifestyle. We should also respect human rights and their culture. We should also understand that they start

from scratch once they enter Japan, whatever their situation in their home country may have been. In other words, they should be given moral support and assistance in their daily life.

The Eisei Hospital provides moral support to EPA nurses. By paying attention to their facial expressions, having conversations with them, and observing their behavior during our everyday life, we keep an eye on any sign of problems. We gather information from their fellow Filipino colleagues and their leaders, too. We also hold regular meetings and plan dinner parties and outdoor activities with them. We also inform the EPA nurses that the Japan International Corporation of Welfare Services (JICWELS) is open for consultation if they are hesitant to talk about their problems with the hospital personnel. Through the agency, they can express delicate concerns—such as leaves, evaluations, and salaries. This is another form of support.

At this point, I would like to introduce Mr. Excel. Mr. Excel came to Japan in 2009 as part of the first batch of EPA nurses from the Philippines. He passed the national examination in 2012. This picture (Figure 2) was taken when he and I were invited as guest lecturers for an international nursing class for the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students of Toho University. A total of 120 BSN students attended and then gave us feedback after the class.

These are the students' comments: "I was astonished by his effort to pass the National Board Examination for Nurses;" "I was given the opportunity to learn the differences between the Philippines and the Japanese medical fields;" "We have to respect the efforts of foreign nurses to understand Japan and also contribute to the Japanese society." A number of comments express admiration for Mr. Excel.

There are also comments that refer to cultural differences between countries: "I learned from him the difficulties of staying in a country with a different culture and trying to qualify as a professional nurse."

How does Mr. Excel view the cultural differences? Generally speaking, Filipinos are not as time-conscious as the Japanese. Overseas Filipino

FIGURE 2
Lecture at Toho University for BSN students
(Mr. Excel as guest lecturer on international nursing)



workers (OFWs) usually take a long annual leave to see their families once in a while. It is most important for OFWs to provide financial support to their families. (Many Japanese are not familiar with this idea.)

Advantages of Accepting Foreign Nurses

As I mentioned earlier, Japanese medical staff became more cooperative and proactive in learning. They came to be interested in different cultures and learn more about them. Patients pay attention to EPA nurses and encourage them. Many volunteer workers, not only from the medical but also from other fields of specialization, offered us support. Thus, the hospital staffs are given a global perspective.

Earlier, I mentioned a comment by a nursing student of Toho University that refers to the effort to overcome cultural differences.

Indeed, there are cultural differences between countries. In my personal opinion, cultural adaptation—including acquiring knowledge of the Japanese language—is the most important factor for EPA nurses to pass the National Board Examination for Nurses of Japan and to work there as a professional.

What are the cultural differences in nursing? In Japan, the duties and responsibilities of a nurse are stipulated in the “Act on Public Health Nurses, Midwives, and Nurses.” According to the act, nurses have two major duties and responsibilities. One is assisting doctors in medical and surgical interventions—that is, assisting doctors in medication, rendering first aid and emergency care, and operating respirator and other high-tech medical equipment under the supervision of doctors. Another duty is assisting patients and clients on activities of daily living (ADL) at bedside—that is, the care on the needs of patients. This can be done without the supervision of doctors. In the Philippines, I understand that the primary duty of nurses is support on medication.

Implementation of the EPA: Some Suggestions

I would like to give some suggestions on the implementation of the EPA based on my perspective.

First, on nursing education, I would like to suggest that nursing schools of Japan and the Philippines collaborate on the following: (a) cohosting seminars and workshops to study, understand, and share the content of the nursing laws of both countries; (b) exchanging educators; and (c) offering Japanese language course as an elective subject at nursing colleges to give students the option to learn Japanese, targeting to reach the JLPT N3 level or, if possible, level N2.

Second, one of the application requirements for the JPEPA nurses is a minimum of three years working experience. However, I am not sure if such work experience is an advantage because when they go to Japan, they have to start from “zero” due to cultural differences. It might disappoint

them that they cannot apply their work experience as much as they would have expected before going to Japan.

Third, I suggest the following measures be implemented in Japan: First, since JPEPA nurse candidates have met the requirement of having a degree in nursing and passing the nurse licensure examination of the Philippines, they have a basic working knowledge of nursing. Therefore, in order for them to pass the national examination of Japan, I think it is more effective if they shift their focus on studying the Japanese language and the Japanese style of nursing. Second, at present, candidates are determined to stay in Japan for three years before passing the National Board Examination for Nurses. I disagree that those who failed the national examination have to return to their home country. In my opinion, most of them may be able to master the Japanese language and pass the National Board Examination if they are given five to seven years. And I wish we could offer some exemptions to some of them and give them permission to extend their stay. For example, those who passed the exam given by prefectural government to become *jun-kangoshi* (prefectural licensed nurse) might be permitted to extend their stay. Furthermore, we also need to take the returnees into consideration. Establishing a system for returnees to take the Japanese National Board Examination for Nurses in the Philippines will solve the problem of lack of financial resources needed to travel to Japan in taking the examination. A “post-examination support” should also be given to those who have passed the licensure examination. The existing support system basically covers the period only up to the passing of the examination; but I think continuing support is also necessary after earning a license.

Lastly, I would like to present the views of Mr. Excel on the implementation of the EPA. He proposes the following: “we need support system for the EPA nurses after passing the National Board Examination for Nurses;” “the EPA nurses need predeparture training on culture, including Japanese language lessons, before going to Japan;”⁵ there is also need for “the presence of counselors or advisers who

understand Filipino culture and who could provide psychological support.”

I would like to share with you the dream of Mr. Excel who is working hard as a nurse at Eisei Hospital. He said,

“I want to repay my debt of gratitude to Japan... As a nurse, I want to extend my care to the people around the world... Then I want to contribute to the Philippine nation by sharing the medical knowledge that I learned in Japan with my fellow Filipinos.”

Finally, based on my own experience, I think that the most important thing is that both Filipinos and Japanese respect each other, and that both learn mutually from the each other’s positive traits and grow together. For this purpose, I encourage that we nurture a workplace where people can coexist with foreigners and contribute to international exchange. I wish that EPA nurse candidates who are trying their best at Eisei Hospital become good role models and mentors to their juniors and fellow foreign nurses who will follow their path.

Notes

- ¹ See the table for the passing rate of Filipino EPA nurse candidates.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Filipino Examinees	51	113	158	138	150	163
Passers	1	1	13	10	16	14
Passing rate	1.7%	0.9%	8.2%	7.2%	10.7%	8.6%

(Interview with an officer of the MHLW by an editorial member on 18 September 2015.) See also <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/04-Houdouhappyou-10805000-Iseikyoku-Kangoka/0000079086.pdf>.

- ² These measures were applied to the first and second batches of Filipino candidates and the first and second batches of Indonesian candidates who entered Japan before the establishment of predeparture Japanese language training program.

- ³ This required score of at least “102 points” is subject to change each year (Interview with an officer of the MHLW by an editorial member in December 2013).
- ⁴ In 2015, one Filipino former EPA nurse candidate passed the examination. See <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/04-Houdouhappyou-10805000-Iseikyoku-Kangoka/0000079086.pdf>.
- ⁵ The predeparture Japanese language training has been offered since 2011 (starting with the third batch).