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Our overworked and unpaid/underpaid nurses badly need help

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IT'S a great paradox of the nursing profession in the Philippines. While more nurses are needed to serve the sick, with about 7 out of 10 impoverished Filipinos dying without ever seeing any health care professional, more than half a million nurses are unemployed or underemployed.

Beside the massive local unemployment issue are continued horrifying stories of abuse and exploitation of nurses who suffer poor working conditions and get starvation-level salaries with no benefits and job security. And not only are many nurses compelled to work as "volunteers" with no pay just to gain hospital experience, some are even required to pay for "training" while working.

The dismal situation has long been plaguing the nursing profession and many are exasperated that relief seems nowhere in sight. About two years ago, I wrote in this column some dreadful tales of nursing woes that surfaced in a two-day National Conference in Manila. Similar stories are still being told.

One told of a typical volunteer nurse who has been in a government hospital in Metro Manila in for about a year – on duty 16 hours daily without any salary – and still hoping to be finally employed in the hospital where each nurse attends to about 35 to 50 patients.

Another story was that of a nurse in another Metro Manila hospital who endured six months of exhausting work, on duty for also 16 hours straight per week in a ward with at least 30 patients. "I was once on duty at the emergency room for 24 hours. I was the only nurse there at that time. It was very tiring. I have to assist the doctor, and I have to admit a patient.

Sometimes due to exhaustion, I could not properly put IV insertion in the patient because I had been on my feet the whole day," he said.

The grim situation was brought to light anew during the February 18 episode of my DZMM teleradyo program SagotKo 'Yan (8 to 9 a.m. Sundays) in which my studio guests were Rep. Leah S. Paquiz of AngNars party-list, Cecilia Banca Santos of the Philippine League of Government Midwives Inc., and Sean Herbert Velchez who is convenor of #Laban-Nurses movement.

My guests were one in voicing an urgent appeal to President Rodrigo Duterte to alleviate the plight of underpaid and overworked nurses and all other health workers comprising the country's health care delivery system. They lamented that many health professionals are still under the so-called "endo scheme" in which no real employer-employee relationship exists and work is classified as "job order" or under contract of service.

As such, they "have no security of tenure because our contract ends yearly, subject to reapplication and qualifying process," Paquiz explained. She also lamented that most of the work areas "are hazardous and yet we have no hazard pay" and that workers are "exposed to various kinds of diseases, such as tuberculosis, without any protective gear."

She also decried the "rampant practice of backer/palakasan system" and the delay in salaries, the absence of basic benefits and 13th month pay. "We have no pay slip, that is why we don't know what deductions are made from our salaries," Paquiz wrote in a letter to President Duterte.

For his part, Velchez called for the passage of a comprehensive law that could really protect health workers and slap higher penalties

on "those who abuse and hurt nurses and health workers." He also asked to: Regularize contractual nurses and give plantilla positions to those under the Nurses Deployment Program of the Department of Health; increase the starting salary of nurses to P30,000 for both private and public sectors to encourage them to stay and serve Filipinos in need; and strictly comply with the DOH standard of the nurse-patient ratio of 1:12.

They were also one in calling for a stop to the "proliferation of expensive trainings and seminars" under the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Law. Paquiz said the CPD "must be used to strengthen in-service trainings given by employers to their workers, free of cost." She added that CPD "should be relevant and benefit the participant and given at a reasonable cost" and that it "must be a bridge to legally recognize certification or specialty learning programs previously taken by professionals."

It's imperative that government acts swiftly to avert the continuing crisis in the nursing profession. The huge unemployment rate — due to shrinkage in the US market and oversupply of nursing graduates — has fueled exploitation of nurses yearning to gain enough experience to qualify for work in other countries.

An increased health budget to boost the plight of nurses and to hire unemployed nurses for urgent healthcare needs in the country's poorest barangays will go a long way to uplift not only the plight of our nurses but also our country's public health care system which some fear may collapse from the "brain drain" resulting from migration of other health professionals.

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