

Bureaucracy behind the One Percent Pass Rate of Foreign Nurses

By IRIYAMA Akira

254 applicants from Indonesia and Philippines who have visited Japan under Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) sat for Japan's nursing qualification exam. And only three have passed. Given that the pass rate of the exam of foreign applicants was only one percent whereas the overall pass rate of the Japanese applicants is above 90 percent, it is quite clear that the language used in the exam poses a huge barrier to foreign applicants. They have reportedly taken only six months of language training before coming to Japan and then have been left to improve their language skills on their own beside their daily working experience in Japanese hospitals. They are required to pass the test within three years of stay in Japan. Otherwise, they must return home. Things could not have been more wrong.

With the advent of the aging society, apprehensions about shortfalls of nurses and caregivers are being voiced. It is quite uncharacteristic of the government, which is supposed to protect the lives of its citizens, to leave untouched serious capacity shortage of nursery school, while concerns of rapid aging and low birthrate are being raised. In short, the government is only good at mouthing empty slogans and rhetoric and is unwilling to make sincere efforts to put them into practice. Thus it would end up leaving the entire tasks to bureaucrats. That is what is behind the one percent pass rate of foreign nurses.

Most of the foreign applicants already possess nursing qualifications in their own countries. Then, it is obvious that their Japanese language skill matters. It does not take a capable government official to understand that nursing requires exquisite language skill. While it is quite doubtful whether foreigners can master even the basic spoken Japanese within a year or two, those foreign nurses are required to be familiar with medical terms and acquire communicative skills so that they can tell the nature of pains their patients suffer, whether it is sharp, dull or throbbing. It is quite clear what has to be done to rectify the situation.

Meticulosity in business costs money. And seeking perfection is too demanding especially to today's Japan which is on the brink of financial collapse. However, the worst type of measures to be taken would be to resort to makeshift settlement, just as in the case of the ongoing introduction of foreign nurses to Japan.

Money has been spent, but it is good for nobody. Coming under pressure of the Indonesian government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan overrides the resistance of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan and proceeds to conclude an EPA with Indonesia. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare quite reluctantly undertakes the task of implementing concrete measures. True, the field has been ploughed but the seeds have been forgotten. It is a project sizably financed from the government fund but is to the satisfaction of nobody involved (except those three who passed the exam, probably). It would be far more important to bring it all down to earth than to mouth such empty slogans as "opening up the bureaucracy" or "opening up our future." That is what true leadership is supposed to be.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. IRIYAMA Akira, Guest Professor of Cyber University, and Executive Research Advisor of International Development Center of Japan, which originally appeared on the BBS “Hyakka-Somei” of CEAC on March 30, 2010.)