
Tackling the 'Nursing Exodus' in the Philippines



The top supplier of nurses globally, the Philippines is hit with a shortage of nurses at home. Retention strategies could involve creating a positive working environment that boosts nurses' work satisfaction and career development

The Philippines has been known as a major – if not the largest – exporter of nurses globally. It was estimated that in 2020, some 240,000 Filipino nurses are working across the world.

But ironically, the country is now facing a growing nursing shortage at home. As of 2023, the Philippines faces a shortage of around [127,000 nurses](#), a number which is expected to grow to [250,000 by 2030](#).



Ms Everrette C. Zafe

The reasons behind this trend are many-fold, but Ms Everrette C. Zafe, Nursing Director at [World City Medical Center \(WCMC\)](#) in Manila, points to the COVID-19 pandemic as a tipping point.

Before the pandemic, the hospital saw the pace of recruits keeping up with the pace of those leaving. The pandemic however heavily disrupted this balance.

"Nurses feared the risk of catching the virus themselves, and we saw an exodus of nurses with many leaving the profession altogether. At the peak, we were seeing 2 to 3 resignations every week," said Ms Zafe.

With a nursing strength of around 130 Staff nurses at WCMC, the rate of resignations was significant.

Moreover, as more nurses began catching the virus and stayed home to be quarantined, the number of nurses available at the hospital fell further, she noted.

As such, it has had to halt admissions for a while due to a lack of nurses to ensure quality of care.

When the pandemic situation stabilised, the hospital then faced the new challenge of nurse retention. With the reopening of borders, many countries dangled attractive packages to Filipino nurses, including higher compensation, conducive benefits, and visa provisions.

On the Philippine government's end, several measures were launched to tackle the growing shortage, including temporary deployment bans restricting nurses from moving abroad. Last year, it launched the [Clinical Care Associate programme](#), allowing the employment of nursing school graduates who have yet to pass their board exams.

Creating a 'Positive Practice Environment' to improve nurse retention

On the other hand, Philippine hospitals have also developed initiatives to better support nursing retention.

For Ms Zafe and WCMC, one of these was the 'Positive Practice Environment' initiative.



According to the World Health Professions Alliance, [positive practice environments](#) are “healthcare settings that support excellence and decent work conditions, and have the power to attract and retain staff, provide quality patient care and strengthen the health sector”.

There were five areas identified to be key characteristics of such positive practice environments, which WCMC referenced in improving its nursing work environment:

- **Professional Recognition and Empowerment** – To improve performance and build professional self-worth.
 - E.g. Promoting nurses' professional autonomy and career development
- **Management Practices and Incentives** – To enable and encourage health workers to stay in their jobs, in their profession, and their countries.
 - E.g. Providing a thorough orientation programme, work-life balance
- **Support Structures**
 - E.g. Embarking on work redesign, process improvement projects
- **Education and Information** – To provide opportunities to learn, develop, progress, and save lives.
 - E.g. Offering opportunities for in-service training, participation in specialty associations
- **Occupational Health and Safety** – To keep employees safe so they remain healthy, motivated, and productive.
 - E.g. Adhering to safe nurse-patient ratio, regulations that ensure safe working conditions



Other initiatives to reduce nursing workload and improve satisfaction

Since WCMC launched the project in late 2022, it has seen its retention rate improve. The hospital now has more nurses than it did before the pandemic, with ongoing recruitment to meet the needs of the hospital's ongoing expansion plans.

"I believe it is not the answer to control where our nurses wish to go, but to build an environment where they can be happy, satisfied, and valued when working," said Ms. Zafe.

In addition to this programme, the hospital has hired 45 nursing assistants to take on some tasks under the strict supervision of a Nurse, such as patient hygiene procedures, change of linen, and recording of vital signs, to reduce the nursing workload.

The organisation is now working on a nursing module to be added to its EMR system by this year, which would make it faster and easier for nurses to record nurses' notes, relevant information of the patient and contribute to better patient outcomes in achieving holistic care.

But despite the robust implementation of innovations and efforts in upgrading equipment, machines, and digitalisation, the heart of the Nursing profession is the compassion and empathy for patients, she noted. "Filipino Nurses are known to be unique in demonstrating "tender loving care" and it is backed up by Filipino culture with an innate sense of care and compassion. In addition, the quality education and professional training of Filipino Nurses make them invaluable assets in every healthcare setting globally. Because of this uniqueness, the Filipino way of demonstrating care resulted in higher patient satisfaction as well."

The hospital is hence planning a new project on integrating the enhanced and distinctively defined caring nursing presence into patient care customised for WCMC – based on the belief that nurses' positive interactions with patients and their loved ones could contribute to patients' healing and recovery.

The Hospital Management Asia (HMA) 2024 conference will be held in Bali, Indonesia from 28 to 29 August. There will be a dedicated Nursing track, with sessions on redesigning nursing care and exploring the 'economic power' that nurses bring. Don't miss this chance to hear from international and regional healthcare leaders – click here to find out more about HMA 2024 and register: <https://www.hospitalmanagementasia.com/hma-2024/>

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