

EDITORIAL: Japan needs to open its doors wider for foreign workers

With its population aging rapidly, Japan will see an increased need for more nursing and health care professionals in the years ahead.

Japan could find itself in serious trouble if it erects barriers too high for foreign workers wishing to work here.

Japan and Vietnam are now holding talks to establish a system that will allow young Vietnamese to work as nurses and nursing care workers in Japan. The negotiations are based on a bilateral economic partnership agreement.

Japan already has programs to accept such health care workers from Indonesia and the Philippines under bilateral economic partnership agreements with these countries. But these programs have turned out to be riddled with problems.

These problems need to be fixed if Japan is to establish a better program with Vietnam.

Under existing programs, trainees receive about half a year of training before coming to Japan and then work for three years at Japanese hospitals as they prepare for state examinations to qualify as a health care professional. Nearly 600 candidates from Indonesia and the Philippines have taken part in the programs since fiscal 2008.

Of the 254 foreign trainees who took the nursing license exam last year, however, only three were successful. The number of successful applicants for the exam held in March this year was larger at 16, but the pass rate was still as low as 4 percent.

In order to prevent the unsuccessful candidates from returning home en masse, the government decided to allow the first group of Indonesian trainees to stay in Japan for one more year.

But many of the young Indonesians who failed to qualify have given up on working in Japan and have returned home.

The government should not allow a similar situation where the young Vietnamese who come to Japan with hopes of working here return home disappointed.

The biggest factor behind the low ratios of successful applicants is clearly the language barrier.

It is apparently an overwhelming challenge for these trainees to learn enough Japanese while working.

In addition, the need to learn many technical terms further increases the difficulty of passing the license examination. As a result, trainees whose work was rated highly by the hospitals did not necessarily pass the exam.

In its current state, the system appears as if it was designed to reject rather than accept foreign nationals wishing to work as health care professionals in Japan.

It is necessary to give the trainees one year or so of Japanese language training so that they can acquire at least sufficient skills for everyday conversation. The state license exam also needs to be improved.

Under the economic partnership agreements with Indonesia and the Philippines, two or three years of experience in the profession are required to be eligible for the programs. But it is doubtful whether such lengthy experience is really necessary.

Some Japanese experts say it is easier for younger trainees to get acclimated to the working practices and conditions at Japanese medical institutions.

Since the Great East Japan Earthquake, many Indonesian and Philippine trainees remained at hospitals and facilities in affected areas to help victims. The ways they contributed to disaster relief efforts were reported and much talked about back in their home countries.

We should value young foreigners who have come to have affection for Japan.

Competition for human resources in Asia is getting stronger.

Japan needs to create an open and attractive system to get more qualified and talented foreign workers.

The new administration of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda should reconsider the government's policy of accepting foreign workers so as to open the nation's door wider to human resources from around the world.

--The Asahi Shimbun, Sept. 6

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