



The Philippine STAR Opinion

NCLEX in Manila open by mid-year GOTCHA By Jarius Bondoc

Publication Date: [Monday, February 12, 2007]

CHICAGO — Pop the champagne and pray in thanksgiving. The Philippine bid to hold the US nursing licensure exam in Manila succeeded. Filipino nurses who wish to work in America no longer must travel abroad, burning hundreds of dollars, just to take the NCLEX (Nursing Council Licensure Examination). They can do it in Manila starting mid-2007. Other Asians may, too, as an unintended boost for Philippine tourism.

The good news came Thursday evening as the exhausted delegation from Manila, led by Commission on Filipinos Overseas head Dante Ang, was about to sup. President Faith Fields of the US National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), as NCLEX overseer, announced a unanimous decision. It capped two hours of grilling earlier on Philippine assurances of exam security and housecleaning after fraud marred its own nursing board tests last June.

Ang quickly informed President Arroyo of the event. Manila news outlets called to confirm. The persistence of Filipinos on both sides of the Pacific finally paid off. The first step to nursing job placement in America will now be cut in cost by at least half.

The Philippine Nurses Association in America (PNAA) first broached the idea in 2002 of NCLEX locating in Manila. The NCSBN at that time was mulling to open the licensing test outside the US and its territories in two years. For PNAA past president Filipinas Lowery and present president Rosario May Mayor, it was only logical that Manila be among the pilot areas. After all, Filipinos have always formed the bulk of examinees — over 9,000 or 35 percent per year in the 1990s. (That figure jumped to more than 15,000 or 60 percent last year.) The closest and thus cheapest to reach test site back then was Saipan, for which examinees had to pay \$200 exam fee and \$600 for fare, food and lodging. Locating the exam in Manila would mean paying only the basic \$200-fee plus \$150 for foreign processing, but no more overseas travel. They would be able to use the savings to review.

All easier said than done, though. Too frequent were reports of coups and kidnappings in Manila, making the NCSBN hesitant. Software piracy was also rampant, worrying NCLEX examiners about tricksters simply memorizing their questions to transform into nursing school lectures. In 2004 the only new sites opened were London, Seoul and Hong Kong.

In Mar. 2005 Ang joined the NCLEX effort, raising it to an official venture with the PNAA and the Philippine Nurses Association in the homeland. He got the US embassy and American Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines to support the Manila testing location. NCSBN officials were invited to Manila for a first-hand look at facilities, physical and software security, and Filipino nursing life. They saw that not only the US Medical Licensing Examination was being given trouble-free in Manila, but also the CGFNS (Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools) tests to qualify for the NCLEX. Most telling was the work ethics of Filipino nurses, the reason they comprise 83 percent of foreign nurses in America and are the most preferred by hospitals, doctors' clinics and care homes.

For good measure, Ang suggested to President Arroyo the formation of an inter-agency Task Force-NCLEX, consisting of his CFO, and reps from the PNA, the Professional Regulatory Commission's Board of Nursing, the labor office, NBI or PNP, and association of nursing school deans.

The group had just been formed on July 31, 2006, when news broke that the nursing board test of the previous month was marked by question leakage. To make matters worse, at least two nursing board members and PNA

officers who owned review centers were implicated. As if that were not enough, the PRC at first denied the leakage, and when examinees came forward to confess to benefiting from the leaks, it tried to sweep the matter under the rug by re-computing the grades and increasing the number of passers. A consequent court order for a partial exam retake only further muddled the affair.

The exam fraud was but a part of the bigger problem of nursing. There was also the issue of poor education. Schools, cashing in on a surge of enrolments from news of a nurse shortage in America, were churning out 80,000 or so grads per year. But only 32,000 or so are able to pass the board test, and only 2,000 easily get jobs in top hospitals.

A second NCSBN visiting group in Oct. 2006, led by president Fields, became all the more worried about NCLEX security and quality of examinees coming from diploma mills. By Dec. the US board decided to open six more testing sites outside the US: Taiwan, Mexico, India, Canada, Australia and Germany. Again, Manila was scratched from the list.

Ang refused to give up. He was fighting against the PRC for a total retake by June examinees, and was being vilified in the press for it. But he pressed on, promising the NCSBN that the Task Force-NCLEX would help solve the problem of exam fraud and education standards. Last Thursday, on the NCSBN's invitation, Ang presented the accomplishments: NBI probe and indictment of at least 13 exam leaks and cohorts, replacement of all BON members, PRC supervision by the labor department, and review of the nursing curriculum to suit US standards.

Pearson-VUE, the company that actually handles the NCLEX outside America, made an extra pitch. Fraser Cargill, as Asia-Pacific director, said that if anyone has to worry about exam and physical security, it's him. Yet his firm gives out three other international tests in the Philippines, including supposedly deadly Mindanao, and has had no hitches. Cargill added that only in the Philippines is his work being made easier by a Task Force that reports directly to the President. It was thus that he gave an estimate of three months max to set up the first NCLEX test site in Manila.

Deeply impressing the NCSBN was the Filipinos' full-court press. Lowery and Mayor flew in from New York to Chicago's below-zero weather to help Ang present the Manila case. There too was Leo Felix Jurado, wearing two hats as head of the New Jersey state board of nursing and PNAA president-elect for 2008. With Ang were BON chairwoman Carmencita Abaquin, Atty. Elfren Meneses of the NBI anti-fraud and computer theft division, Atty. Ariss Santos representing Labor Sec. Arturo Brion, PNA past and present presidents Ruth Padilla and Leah Samaco Paquiz, and Consul General Blesila Cabrera.

Take a bow, gentlemen and ladies.