

One of the 'Sentosa 27' Tells Her Story

ETHICAL CODE GIVES HOPE TO FOREIGN-EDUCATED NURSES.

When asked about her experience as a foreign-educated nurse (FEN) recruited from the Philippines to work in the United States, Archiel Buagas told Patricia M. Pittman, coauthor of "U.S.-Based Recruitment of Foreign-Educated Nurses: Implications of an Emerging Industry" (*Original Research*, June): "I was so scared of going to work that before my shift, I would be crying, I'd be [vomiting] because of anxiety and nervousness. I would have diarrhea. . . . [T]he only thing that made me sleep was the fact that I'm so tired. . . . I wanted to go home."

Buagas was one of the "Sentosa 27," a group of Filipino nurses who abruptly resigned from their jobs in several nursing homes in New York State on April 26, 2006, citing unfair working conditions. Ten of the nurses were subsequently indicted for patient endangerment by the Suffolk County district attorney's office, causing outrage from the nursing and Filipino communities (see *In the News*, August 2007).

Claiming they were misled and taken advantage of by both the Sentosa Recruitment Agency in the Philippines and Sentosa Care, LLC, in the United States, the nurses fought back. Among the many complaints they lodged against Sentosa were problems with work permits, low pay, high patient load, and inadequate orientation. Charges against the nurses were dropped in January 2009.

According to Buagas, problems began when she was still in the Philippines. "I wanted to get a copy of the contract, but they didn't want it taken out and be photocopied. So I just left it there. They said over time they would send us papers. There were lots of papers that we signed and I just couldn't keep track of what they were about."

Although the nurses were told by the recruiter in the Philippines that if they didn't feel comfortable, their orientations would be extended, this was not the

case for Buagas. "I was afraid to go to work, because I was afraid that I would do more harm than good to my patients," she said. "I felt like I needed more orientation, but they wouldn't give it because they needed people on the floor, to be there."

Buagas also said that she and the other FENs she lived with were asked to work long hours and on their days off, often without adequate compensation for the overtime. She worked in a long-term care facility and cared for an average of 30 to 60 patients per shift, and sometimes as many as 100, working as the medication, treatment, and charge nurse all at the same time. "We were also regularly floated to units we were not [familiar with]," she said.

After leaving her job along with the other "Sentosa 27" nurses, Buagas was out of work for three months before finally getting a job as a nurse on a city hospital psychiatric unit. She said she was scared on her first day, but when she noticed that here the nurses actually took breaks, she went into the bathroom and cried.

"The unit has its crazy days, but it's not as . . . crazy as it was before and people actually help each other," she said. "I actually receive respect, which I didn't feel when I was working at the agency before."

Buagas said the development of the *Voluntary Code of Ethical Conduct for the Recruitment of Foreign-Educated Nurses to the United States* (www.fairinternationalrecruitment.org/index.php/the_code), which defines a set of standards aimed at protecting FENs from abusive practices and fosters adequate orientation programs, has a special meaning for FENs and empowers them. "With this ethical code, FENs wouldn't have to dread the unknown," she said.

To see a video of Buagas speaking at Academy-Health's September 4, 2008, press event announcing the release of the code, go to <http://bit.ly/axpplW>.

—Amy M. Collins, associate editor ▼