

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

Brain Drain

MANILA, Philippines - BRAIN drain, which resulted from the migration of many Filipino professionals, is one more reason for me to pursue the establishment of a national program to help cancer patients.

According to "Wikipedia," a website free encyclopedia, brain drain originally referred to technology workers leaving their home countries, but it has since expanded into the departure of all professionals to other countries, usually for higher pay and better living conditions.

Brain drain is also considered as an economic cost because the departing professionals usually take with them part of the value of their training sponsored by the government or other organizations.

A study conducted by the University of the Philippines, the results of which were published by newspapers last year, suggested that the government should adopt measures to prevent brain drain from affecting the country's economic development.

The study, titled "Migration of Skills, Talents, and Expertise: Development Challenges for the Philippines," discussed mainly the outflow of skills and talents in the industry sector, but to me, the impact of migrating medical professionals is similarly adverse to the health sector.

Thus, the recommendation to adopt measures to cope with brain drain in the industry sector should also apply to brain drain among medical professionals.

The common reason for the departure of professionals, including doctors and nurses, is, as we said, economic: Higher pay and better living conditions. Therefore, offering professionals better compensation should serve as an incentive for them to stay here.

At present, government hospitals face difficulty in hiring and retaining doctors, nurses, and other health practitioners because of the salary standardization law, which regulates salary rates for all government employees, including doctors.

In my view, these professionals should be exempted from the salary standardization law to give them better wages and benefits that will be competitive with those offered by medical institutions abroad.

We can conduct a major recruitment exercise for five years to absorb a good part of our graduates. We can also start with graduates from medical schools; those who opt to undergo residency training, and, eventually, occupy regular staff positions in the proposed cancer centers will be assured reasonable pay, plus some extras.

The same incentives should be offered to those graduates who are taken into the cancer research program. This would be the beginning of the development of a local scientific community.

I don't think the proposed cancer program would be an expensive undertaking. Actually, the program may also be able to avail of grants from other countries, including international non-government organizations. And, if worse comes to worst, we can tap, for instance, part of the sin tax to finance the program.

The sin tax can generate R60 billion if we tell the people that the money is going to massive cancer program. I believe they would willingly pay if they know where it is going. And this should be used by proponents of the sin tax reform bill, which the administration wants enacted before the end of this year, to gain support for the bill and ensure its approval.

There might be some arguments about funding, but I don't think anybody will argue against the benefits of adopting and implementing a cancer program because of its benefits: We can help reduce brain drain, provide better care to our cancer patients (plus opportunities for effective treatment from our own research) and improve the compensation and benefit package for our doctors and nurses.

Why am I limiting my proposal to cancer? Of course, this can be done in other health areas, but we have to start somewhere. And, because of the unique problems associated with cancer, including the cost and length of treatment, my position is that we start with a cancer program first.

If it succeeds, the program can be replicated in other diseases. In fact, a similar program can be modified and applied even to specific industries which we want to develop to become globally competitive, such as those that require engineering skills and training.

(Please send comments/feedback to: mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com)

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