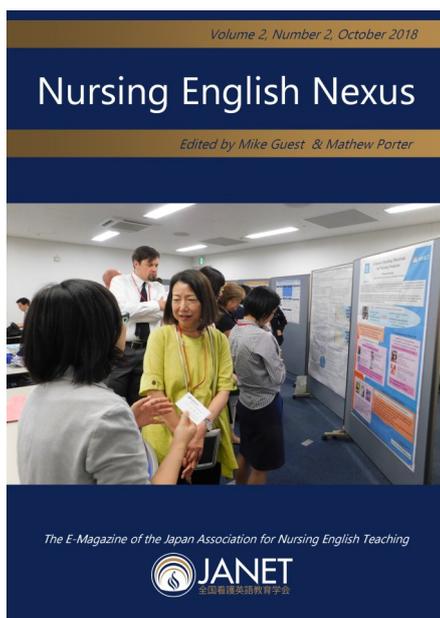


The Importance of Multicultural Understanding in the Health Care Professions: Looking at the Challenges Faced by Foreign Candidate Nurses

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The Importance of Multicultural Understanding in the Health Care Professions: Looking at the Challenges Faced by Foreign Candidate Nurses

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Abstract: Currently, Japanese society is facing a crisis concerning a decline in population, with fewer marrying and a smaller number of families having children. With the overall population aging, the healthcare system feels an extra burden, which is underscored by a critical shortage of nurses. To help compensate for this, the Japanese government has participated in programs which allow nurses from other countries to have the opportunity to work and live in Japan. This paper will outline some of the difficulties faced by the foreign nursing care workers, with a special emphasis on the need for awareness of cultural differences between the foreign nursing care workers and elderly Japanese patients who need their care.

The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) was formed as an effort to liberalize the service trade among several countries and covers many areas and a wide range of economic activities (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2011). Some EPA candidates from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam have successfully acquired national nursing qualifications in Japan (Japan International Corporation of Welfare Services, 2010). However, between 2008 and 2017, only about 20% of 1,203 EPA candidates who have been accepted and who have come to Japan have successfully passed the national nursing exam (Japan International Corporation of Welfare Service, 2018). These statistics show that it has been more difficult than expected for EPA candidates to pass national nursing examinations. Other challenges include Japanese language education measures and the administration of the national examination, as well as changes needed in the workplace environment to accommodate workers from other countries (Inoue, 2011; Ogata, 2011). In addition to communication difficulties due to linguistic differences, some of the staff in the hospitals accepting the candidates have felt it unfair that changes to the workplace environment have become necessary to accommodate the EPA candidates (Hattori, 2010; Miyazawa, 2010). It seems that having to adapt to the workplace environment is another hurdle for the EPA candidate nurses to overcome, making it difficult

for them to stay in those facilities which accepted them (Figure 1).

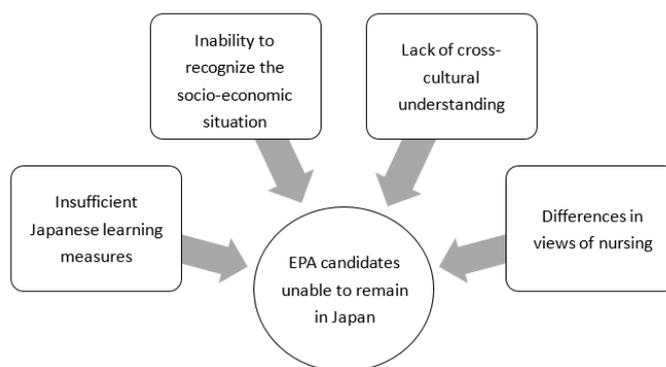


Figure 1. Problems faced by EPA candidates

Problems faced by EPA candidates

Research in recent years has identified various challenges the EPA candidates need to overcome. These include: Japanese learning measures, recognition of socio-economic situations, cross-cultural understanding, and differences in nursing viewpoints. Each of these will be outlined separately below.

As a result of these issues, EPA candidates often feel that settling in Japan, which was a major incentive behind their participation in the program, has become a difficult reality. Even though they realize the importance of international exchange and intercultural understanding, some EPA candidates who have passed the national exam decide to return to their countries due to their inability to overcome the gap in cultural differences (Nagae, Iwase, Furuzawa, Tsubonouchi, Shimai, & Ando, 2013).

Japanese Learning Measures

One of the purposes of the EPA is for candidates to acquire the national nursing qualifications and to be able to work in Japan. Yet because of inadequate proficiency in the Japanese language, learning the language has taken precedence over the purpose of passing the national nursing exam (Nagae, Iwase, Furuzawa, Tsubonouchi, Shimai, & Ando, 2013). EPA candidates often face difficulty in conversing fluently as well as in responding to patients' needs and inquiries. Even though communicative proficiency in Japanese is important, there seems to be no system in place to support this need for the candidates after passing the national exam (Nagae, Iwase, Furuzawa, Tsubonouchi, Shimai, & Ando, 2013).

Recognition of Socio-Economic Situations

The cost of living is high in Japan, and EPA candidates can face real obstacles in having their families join them in Japan, when in fact for most EPA candidates, migrating with their family was a major incentive of working in Japan. Regarding salary, EPA nurses were often unaware of the Japanese social insurance system or how the government deducts taxes from their monthly salary. Some EPA candidates may also need to work as assistants despite being qualified nurses and therefore, they may have complaints about the assistant's lower salary (Mary, 2008; Nagae, Iwase, Furuzawa, Tsubonouchi, Shimai, & Ando, 2013). When considering all these points, we need to question how much the EPA candidates, as well as the staff at the Japanese hospitals, understand the contents of the program or whether it has been explained clearly from the start.

Cross-Cultural Understanding

Another area of concern arises when EPA candidates encounter the reality of Japanese food and eating customs. These new ways of approaching food and diets might raise a problem for EPA candidates, which can be difficult to overcome if they come from a country with

strikingly different religious and cultural beliefs than the Japanese. EPA candidates may also feel uneasy about the cultural tendency for Japanese to not express their feelings as openly as other cultures might. However, Japanese often appreciate that others are able to read their behavior without explicit conversation (Go, 2012; Nagae, Iwase, Furuzawa, Tsubonouchi, Shimai, & Ando, 2013).

Difference in Views of Nursing

The methods and understanding of nursing care can also differ between cultures. In EPA candidate countries, the practice of nursing is more involved with the patient and their families, similar to that of a helper or caregiver. Therefore, EPA candidates have had the impression that nursing care in Japan is less involved with the patients (Nagae, Iwase, Furuzawa, Tsubonouchi, Shimai, & Ando, 2013). Moreover, in the workplace environment, Japanese prefer using fewer words to communicate and prefer being able to read the atmosphere or feelings of others.

Conclusion

In academic studies of cultural differences, we strive for a greater understanding of the human condition. Research for cultural understanding should play a key role in healthcare and will be vitally important in the future of Japan, especially given the dire shortage of nurses in the country, as research clarifying the current state of culturally aware health care is still only in the developing stages. Respect for one's traditional culture is particularly important, but the cultures of others, whether national, regional, social, religious or ethnic, also need to be acknowledged.

For the EPA candidates to be able to adapt to the workplace environment from both the viewpoint of the candidate and of the Japanese hospital, we need to consider not only the nursing education system, but also have a greater understanding of the cultures of the respective participants. By analyzing and fully considering these perspectives, we can clarify the problem of

accepting EPA candidates as future nurses. Given these points, we feel it is important to contribute to the establishment of a support system to substantially accept foreign nationals as EPA nurses, in accordance with the clear objectives from both Japan and participating countries.

If there is no effective, standardized educational system, the methods of educating EPA candidates is left to the accepting facilities, which can vary greatly while support systems for EPA candidates who live in Japan are also lacking. There is currently no report of detailed information regarding Japanese social culture or methods that EPA candidates can use to adapt to their new workplace environments. At present, efforts and policies for EPA candidates are focused on passing the national nursing exam, but there is no mention of support both prior to and while working in Japan. Therefore, the government should provide better cultural orientations, better language support, improved awareness of the candidates' home countries, and continued on-site support for these EPA candidates to be successful in Japan.

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