

23,277 Filipino nurses and midwives have registered to work in the UK since 1999, but most will return home

# UK attracts the best Filipino nurses

By Sarah Harrison

THE FILIPINO ambassador says the UK is employing the best nurses from his country. And the leader of nurses working in the European Union (EU) has hit out at mass overseas recruitment by governments, warning that it is unethical and could have damaging consequences.

Ambassador Cesar Bautista said a 'high number of the best nurses' are working in the UK and that the Philippines would have to be more aggressive to make sure its health system could retain staff. 'It is a concern to some people that the best nurses go to the UK, but that is true of some of our other professionals as well, especially those who work for technical companies,' he said.

However Mr Bautista added that the exodus of Filipino nurses to the UK was not a problem overall because the Philippines has a surplus. Since 1999, 23,277 Filipino



Cesar Bautista and Sarah Mullally signing the agreement last week

nurses and midwives have registered to work in the UK. Mr Bautista was speaking at the Department of Health last week after signing an agreement that further recognises the contribution of Filipino

nurses to the NHS. The document was countersigned by England's chief nursing officer Sarah Mullally and will ensure Filipino nurses in the NHS have the chance to enhance their skills.

Mr Bautista called the exodus a 'win-win situation' for both countries, as most of the nurses return to the Philippines. But not all of them do so. Filipino Grace Nabus, staff nurse at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Woolwich, has been in the UK for six months. 'I am here

for two years but hopefully I will stay,' she said. Ms Nabus's sister, also a nurse, is now a permanent resident in the UK.

Allen Reilly, leader of a group that campaigns on behalf of Filipino

people living in the UK, said the poor working conditions in the Philippines explain why nurses choose to work in the UK.

'In the Philippines even doctors are retraining to become nurses so they can get work in another country. People will only stay if conditions improve,' he said.

Meanwhile, Paul de Raeye, secretary general of the Standing Committee of Nurses in the EU, has criticised governments that look overseas for nurses. 'Mass overseas recruitment is, to say the least, unethical. In many cases a surplus of nurses may be the result of an under-resourced health service,' Mr de Raeye wrote in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing*.

His committee has asked the European Commission, European Parliament and the Council of Europe to take steps to ensure that all EU countries adopt an ethical approach to nurse recruitment.

## Recruitment success misleading

FIGURES SHOWING a large increase in the number of NHS nurses are misleading because they include part-time staff, workforce experts have said.

Department of Health statistics released last week show that 9,000 nurses joined the NHS along with 1,500 GPs and consultants in the six months up to March. There is also a slight fall in the percentage of nursing posts vacant for more than three months – from 3.1 in March 2002 to 2.9 in March 2003.

Health secretary John Reid said the figures represented a 'steady year-on-year improvement' and were the result of record spending on health care.

But professor James Buchan of Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh, warned that the figures represent a head count of all NHS nurses, regardless of whether they work full time or part time.

RCN general secretary Beverly Malone was also sceptical. 'This is good news and the government

should be congratulated for its efforts. However many of these extra nurses are part time and more still needs to be done to address nursing vacancies. The RCN believes it is vital that the government commits to growing the nursing workforce to the end of the decade.'

NHS labour market expert Pippa Gough pointed out that the increase in the number of nurses was heavily reliant on international recruitment.

'We do not know how long these nurses will stay or where they will go,' said Ms Gough, a fellow at the health think-tank the King's Fund.

Professor Buchan added that a high number of nurses are nearing retirement age. 'There is no opportunity to draw breath or sit back because there is a continuing challenge to replace retiring nurses,' he said.

High vacancy rates among GPs could also mean that nurses step forward into more advanced roles, he added.

## 'Inspirational' midwife wins hospital award



COMFORT MOMOH, believed to be the only midwife in the UK who

performs reversal surgery on women who have suffered genital mutilation, has been named nurse of the year by her employer, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust in London.

Ms Momoh also provides support and counselling for women who have undergone female circumcision.

'I get great satisfaction from performing a reversal on a woman who has been suffering all types of complications from her circumcision. I am able to give her a new life,' she said.

Trust nursing director Irene Scott said Ms Momoh is 'a great source of inspiration'.

## More staff in Northern Ireland

THE NUMBER of nurses and midwives in Northern Ireland increased by 8 per cent to 14,137 in the five years to September 2002 – but some hospitals still show high vacancy rates.

Figures from the Health and Personal Social Services workforce survey show that the total number of nurses is rising steadily, following a dip in the 1990s.

Average nurse vacancy rates in September 2002 were 5 per cent, but The Royal Hospital and the Mater Infirmorum Hospital have 10 per cent.

RCN Northern Ireland board secretary Martin Bradley said: 'The shortage of nurses has been an ongoing problem and these figures demonstrate the need for further investment.'