

Broadening the Membership Base of MD Groups

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Last week I was invited to the national convention of the Association of Philippine Physicians in America (APPA) in Indiana to provide a briefing on corporate and tax matters in my capacity as General Counsel of APPA and its affiliate, APPA Foundation.

The occasion gave me the opportunity as well to talk about other issues with some of the officers and members, including current President, Dr. Rick de Leon.

For several years, the APPA has played an important role in uniting Filipino American physicians. It has gone through a lot of rough patches over the years, but it is heartening to note that it now stands tall and proud as a professional organization with a mission—to provide Filipino American physicians an opportunity to contribute to the betterment of their peers and the Filipino American community, in general.

As with any large group, there are some internal issues that APPA needs to thresh out. But the vital signs, so to speak, are good. Several past presidents attended the convention as an expression of support and solidarity with the current APPA leadership, namely: Drs. Fred Quevedo, Lupo Carlota, Alex Cueto, Jess Ho, Leticia de Castro, Rodolfo Punzalan, Rosie So-Bunag, Alfonso Nillas, Renato Judalena and Henry Eugenio. These former leaders were also instrumental in easing the strained relations and eventually dispelling the conflict within APPA.

Having been general counsel of various Filipino American organizations for years, I have seen physician's groups grow stronger as they expanded their membership. Although APPA remains a major national professional organization, I noticed that there are not as many younger doctors within the ranks.

This is something of concern because I believe an organization needs new blood to

grow, to continue and to remain relevant to its constituents.

I can only surmise what has brought about this lack of participation by younger Filipino American physicians.

One possibility is that there are lesser Filipino doctors entering the US as such because US immigration policy and, to a lesser extent, the Philippine economy dictate that they enter as registered nurses instead.

At present, US immigration law recognizes the critical need for RNs and physical therapists (PTs), but not for physicians or any other profession, for that matter. Among the professions, only RNs and PTs have the easiest access to an employment-based green card.

Consequently, the trend now is that doctors from the Philippines prefer to enter the US as RNs, not just for the obvious reason of immigrating permanently but also because they can earn so much more as nurses here than they would if they continued to practice medicine at home.

Filipino doctors who come to the US under certain training programs find it extremely difficult to apply for immigrant status because of the restrictions imposed by the 2-year foreign residence requirement.

At any rate, I gather that many of the MDs who come here as RNs intend to eventually return to the practice of medicine as soon as personal, economic and immigration circumstances stabilize.

The US is in dire need not just of nurses and PTs. There is a general shortage of medical professionals, including doctors, particularly in what is legally known as "health professional shortage areas," in rural areas nationwide. Unfortunately, the law which is supposed to allow foreign doctors to serve these areas has

complicated requirements that medical facilities rarely avail of it.

In this regard, I think organizations like APPA can sound out their support for immigration reform such as relaxing the foreign residence requirement and including physicians in the list of pre-certified occupations.

The APPA can also utilize its contacts and offer services to Filipino physicians aspiring to participate in US training programs. Further, it may get involved in empowerment issues by aligning itself with other professional and Filipino groups.

In so doing, APPA would in the long run broaden its membership base, help medically-underserved areas in the US and make a positive contribution to the Filipino American community.