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Our nurses, our future: Why Malaysia cannot afford to lose its nurses

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Page 1 of 2

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WALK into any government hospital ward in Sabah before sunrise and the rhythm of healthcare has already begun. In intensive care units and medical wards, nurses respond continuously to deteriorating patients, administer treatments, monitor vital signs, and provide reassurance to families while balancing urgency with compassion. In rural clinics, some travel for hours across remote villages to ensure vaccinations, antenatal and postnatal monitoring continue uninterrupted.

Behind many of these moments is a profession that has become one of the strongest pillars of Malaysia's healthcare system. Yet despite their importance, the realities faced by nurses today are becoming increasingly complex. As Malaysia marks International Nurses Day on 12 May 2026 under the theme "Our Nurses. Our Future. Empowered Nurses Save Lives", the conversation must move beyond appreciation posts and ceremonial tributes. The future of healthcare depends heavily on whether the country can protect, sustain, and empower its nursing workforce.

Malaysia's healthcare system continues to rely heavily on nurses across hospitals, clinics, operating theatres, community health services, intensive care units, and maternal and child clinics. Nurses are often the healthcare professionals who spend the longest time with patients, coordinating care, monitoring deterioration, administering medication, and supporting families during some of life's most vulnerable moments.

However, the demand placed upon them has grown rapidly. The Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) has acknowledged the need to fill approximately 15,000 nursing vacancies this year as part of broader healthcare strengthening

efforts. Malaysia is also working towards improving its nurse to population ratio from around 3.8 nurses per 1,000 population to the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation of 6 per 1,000 population. These figures reflect a widening gap between healthcare demand and available workforce capacity.

Part of the challenge comes from the increasing burden of chronic diseases and an ageing population. Patients today require more complex and long-term care compared to previous decades. Hospital admissions are rising while healthcare facilities continue facing manpower shortages. In many public hospitals, nurses manage overwhelming workloads, particularly during night shifts where ratios may reach one nurse for every 10 to 20 patients in certain wards. Such conditions are not only exhausting but may also compromise patient safety and staff wellbeing.

The issue becomes even more pronounced in Sabah, where geography continues to shape healthcare realities. Sabah has among the largest rural populations in Malaysia, with many communities living far from major healthcare facilities. Nurses stationed in rural areas often travel across rivers, remote roads, and isolated settlements to reach communities with limited access to healthcare services. Community health nurses remain among the most overlooked frontline healthcare providers despite playing critical roles in maternal care, immunisation programmes, infectious disease surveillance, and health promotion activities.

For many Sabahans, especially those in rural districts, nurses are sometimes the first and most consistent healthcare professionals they encounter. Their presence determines whether healthcare reaches underserved populations or remains concentrated within urban centres. Yet these same nurses frequently face shortages of equipment, staffing limitations, long working hours, and emotional strain from being stationed far from their families.

Another growing concern is

the migration of nursing talent overseas. Malaysian nurses are increasingly sought after internationally because of their strong clinical training and adaptability. Countries such as Singapore and those in the Middle East continue offering significantly higher salaries and more attractive career pathways. While the average salary locally may range between RM2,400 to RM3,600 for many early career nurses, overseas opportunities can offer several times more. Malaysia now faces increasing competition in retaining experienced nurses within the national healthcare workforce.

At the same time, the nursing profession itself is rapidly evolving. Today's nurses are no longer confined to traditional bedside roles alone. Many now lead specialised services in intensive care, nephrology, oncology, emergency care, dialysis care, infection control, mental health services, and community outreach programmes. Increasing numbers are also pursuing postgraduate qualifications, leadership development, and advanced clinical certifications to strengthen healthcare delivery in increasingly complex environments.

The nursing profession in Malaysia is also governed through established legal and professional frameworks under the Nurses Act 1950 and regulated by the Malaysian Nursing Board under the Ministry of Health Malaysia. These frameworks oversee professional registration, standards of practice, nursing education, and ethical conduct, reflecting the increasingly specialised and accountable nature of modern nursing practice.

The demand for nurses also continues expanding beyond traditional hospital settings alone. Today, nurses serve across government and private hospitals, primary care clinics, community health programmes, industrial health services, education sectors, and international healthcare systems. Many Malaysian nurses now pursue academic advancement from diploma and degree levels up to Master's and Doctorate qualifications through both public and private universities



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in Malaysia and abroad. These pathways not only strengthen clinical expertise and leadership development but also help prepare future nurse educators, researchers, and healthcare leaders needed to sustain the profession.

Beyond clinical settings, Malaysia is also facing a quieter but equally important challenge involving nursing education. The shortage of qualified nurse educators is becoming increasingly apparent. Producing competent nurses requires qualified educators, clinical instructors, and mentors with advanced training. However, the number of nurses holding Master's or PhD qualifications remains limited. This affects training capacity even when student intake increases. Expanding nursing programmes without enough educators risks weakening training quality and clinical supervision.

Modern nursing education is also changing rapidly. Nurse educators today are expected to integrate digital learning technologies, simulation training, online teaching platforms, and evidence-based practice into teaching approaches.

Despite these pressures, nurses continue to demonstrate extraordinary resilience. During disease outbreaks, disasters, overcrowded wards, and public health crises, they remain

present at the bedside. Their work often extends beyond technical procedures. Many patients remember the nurse who stayed calm during emergencies, explained treatments patiently, or simply offered reassurance during difficult moments. Compassion remains one of the profession's greatest strengths.

Recognition alone, however is not enough. Strengthening the nursing profession requires long term workforce planning, safer staffing ratios, stronger mental health support, improved welfare, fair career progression, and opportunities for higher education. Policies supporting permanent appointments and structured advancement pathways are important steps, but sustainable healthcare reform must continue investing in the people who hold the system together daily.

Recent efforts involving permanent appointments and expanded nursing trainee intake signal positive steps, but long-term sustainability will depend on whether workforce retention and welfare issues are addressed effectively. There is also a need to strengthen local retention strategies in Sabah and Sarawak. Many healthcare workers from East Malaysia hope to serve closer to their hometowns and families. Addressing placement issues and improving rural healthcare

infrastructure may help improve workforce sustainability in these regions.

As Nurses Day 2026 is observed nationwide, the public should remember that healthcare quality is not built solely on technology, buildings, or policies. It is built through human presence, compassion, endurance, and clinical dedication shown daily by nurses across the country.

In every crowded ward, remote clinic, and community outreach programme, nurses continue carrying responsibilities that often go unseen by society. Their uniforms may represent professionalism, but behind them are individuals navigating exhaustion, sacrifice, and immense responsibility while continuing to care for others. A healthcare system can only be as strong as the people who remain standing beside the patient when everyone else has stepped away. In Malaysia, that reality still rests heavily on nurses.

Footnote: Melvin Ebin Bondi is a PhD candidate in Public Health at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. He writes a weekly public health column for The Borneo Post.



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