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Grudging Nurses, Nursing Grudges

The switchboard operator at the Bartow Medical Center in Florida could barely conceal her delight at fielding a call from the Indian media for Mariamma George. "We are so proud of her," she gushed without preamble, surmising that it must be an interview request for the prized Indian employee voted among the top five nurses in the state and putting me through to PR.

The PR folks wheeled her out faster than any cured patient, happy to let Mariamma bask in the glow of an honor that is seldom recognized in the press, which celebrates physicians wildly but rarely their low-key associates. Within minutes, Mariamma was speaking to me, hesitantly telling me about her remarkable journey, unsure why it should be considered newsworthy.

These are good times for nurses in America because there are not enough of them. These are also bad times because there are not enough of them. Surveys suggest that there are now around 120,000 nursing vacancies in the nation's hospitals. The shortage is expected to touch 800,000 in the next decade as the U.S grapples with an aging population, with 78 million baby boomers reaching retirement age.

So the good news is that because of the shortage, nurses can earn as much as \$ 60 an hour in some states. The bad news is many of them are panicked because of the pressure. They are warning that patient care will suffer, and there may be unintended casualties. So they are not just wanted and respected, they are coveted.

The situation is so grave that the U.S Senate is considering removing restrictions on hiring of foreign nurses, much the same way as it allows inflow of high skilled workers in a regulated manner. Such a clause in the

immigration bill would pass easily, since the issue of inviting nurses isn't such a hot potato as hiring foreign tech workers. Besides, this literally is a matter of life and death.

India stands to gain, and to lose. While we poomphet endlessly about our emigrating geek army and doctors fantastic, I have never heard hosannas for the nursing brigade, which must number in the tens of thousands across the world, particularly in the Gulf and America. India and Philippines are said to produce the most nurses among all countries, and increasingly, more and more are heading out, bringing in all those remittances. But it is also leaving a big hole in the health care system, never great to begin with.

Probably serves us right. Typically, says Mariamma, Indians look down on the nursing profession and nurses are not given the respect they deserve. They are overworked and underpaid. That's the way it was when Mariamma left Mumbai in 1975 upon graduating from the Sion Hospital Nursing School. Not much has changed.

We have probably aggravated the situation by looking at nursing as a 'female' profession. Even in the U.S, the ratio of female nurse to male is around 15:1. It's probably worse in India. Ever met a male nurse? And while geeks and physicians are starting to return home after making their fortunes abroad, ever heard of a nurse coming back to work in India?

Mariamma certainly doesn't intend to, and as a matter of fact, she shyly told me that since she migrated, 125 members of her family, immediate and extended, have joined her in the U.S. When she comes home to Mumbai and Quilon this weekend for a holiday, I'm hoping she will see the sisters she left behind are doing a little better. But I'm not holding my breath about it.

As for the female, I wonder sometimes if we hold a collective national grudge for the mid-wifely spanking that startled us into action. Surely we ought to do better for those who gave us life.