

REFUGEE DOCTORS FACE UNCERTAINTY

NYTimes MAY 22 1975

Licensing Steps to Practice in U.S. a Long Process That Varies With State

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Special to The New York Times

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif., May 20—For about 350 Vietnamese refugee doctors, dentists and medical students who are awaiting security clearances to enter this country, the uncertainty of the future includes not just where they will settle but when, if ever, they will practice in this country.

Each state licenses doctors on the basis of a series of examinations but the overwhelming majority of the refugee doctors have not taken even the first step in the licensing process. Depending on the individual circumstances, it could be several years before many get a medical license.

Further, the prospects of Vietnamese medical students transferring to American medical schools appears bleak. The arrival of these students comes at a time when medical schools are turning away qualified students each year in record numbers and when many of these Americans are seeking M.D. degrees in foreign countries.

But because the Vietnamese medical educational system was patterned after the seven-year French M.D. program, some student refugees, depending on how well they do on American examinations, may be able to transfer to the later stages of the four-year American medical schools.

Practice Varies Widely

Though physicians speak a universal scientific language and their skills are transportable, the political systems under which they practice vary widely throughout the world. The problem of doctors' finding comparable jobs in the United States reflects the plight of the lesser skilled Vietnamese refugees.

The estimated 120 Vietnamese doctors at Camp Pendleton include a few who have passed American examinations certifying them specialists in fields such as obstetrics and gynecology and several others

who have trained for varying periods of time in American teaching hospitals.

Yet now more than five Vietnamese refugee doctors now have licenses to practice in any state, according to Dr. Edward Martin, who heads the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's National Health Service Corps in Washington.

Nevertheless, Nebraska's state legislators among others, have come to Camp Pendleton to entice Vietnamese physicians to practice in rural doctorless towns.

Clearing House Role

But Dr. Martin observed in a telephone interview, "There

is a misconception that these 350 doctors represent some type of bonanza for some small rural communities. I don't know how they can practice medicine without a license."

H.E.W. is acting as a clearinghouse in conjunction with the American Medical Association, Dr. Martin said, to assess the level of skills and training of the Vietnamese doctors and then to advise them how to become providers in the American health care delivery system.

"We're prepared for a new life, but we're still in a state of shock, from the evacuation," said Dr. Le Van Dung, a 30-year-old general practitioner who was a regimental surgeon in the Vietnamese army when he fled South Vietnam.

As Dr. Dung pointed to a list of Vietnamese refugee doctors that he had tacked on the wall of the clinic where he was voluntarily treating refugees, he said, "A few of us have taken the [prerequisite] examinations [for foreign doctors] but most of us hadn't thought about that" when practicing in South Vietnam.

Most Vietnamese doctors are prepared to spend the additional years of training in American hospitals that may be needed before they can get a license, Dr. Dung observed.

Hope for More Training

When he gets his American license and is reunited with his fiancée in Arkansas, Dr. Dung said that "I'd like to be G.P. where I could have human contact with patients."

Meanwhile, he added, "I'd like to take additional training in the United States and then go to Africa or Brazil and help in an underdeveloped country for a while so the transition [to American practice] won't be such a big one."

For others like 42-year-old Dr. Nguyen Ngoc Giep, the transition may be easier. Dr. Giep, who spent five years learning his specialty of obstetrics in Philadelphia, said he expected to join the staff of in Augusta, with which he had an exchange program when he was a professor at the University of Saigon.

Dr. Giep, who was evacuated with his wife, four sons and mother, has run the obstetrics clinic at Camp Pendleton. Dr. Giep seemed to be expressing the sentiments of so many other refugees when he said, "We just want to get out—it would make everyone happier because then we could begin to build our new lives."