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UNITY STATEMENT CALLING FOR THE POSTPONEMENT OF THE SEPTEMBER 2021 PLE

We, the different medical and allied health councils, organizations, and individuals, fully support the PLE takers' pleas for reconsideration of scheduling and postponement of the Physician Licensure Examination in September 2021 amid the worst surge yet of active COVID-19 cases in the country.

On August 23, 2021, the DOH has listed a record-breaking **18,332 active cases**, the highest ever recorded new cases in a day, with active infections soaring to 123, 251 cases, leading to a total of more than 1.8M recorded cases since 2020 (1). As of the latest, the positivity rate is reported to be at a staggering 25.5%, with 1 in 4 people tested being positive (2). The highly transmissible and infectious Delta variant which has been found to cause more severe disease has been detected in all regions of the country and is expected to cause a continuous rise in Delta variant cases (3). Consequently, our healthcare system is overwhelmed, with multiple hospitals in NCR declaring full capacity, and health workers being overburdened with the steep rise in patients (4). There are several reports of patients being treated in parking lots and tents outside hospitals with fatigued nurses and doctors handling patients well beyond the ideal HCW to patient ratio (5). Indeed, the nation is facing its worst surge of COVID-19 cases yet.

These dire circumstances pose a great danger not only to the examinees, but all examination proctors and administrators, and facility personnel, who will be potentially

exposed to the virus, infected and affected with the disease. Thus, **this threatens not only their health and safety but of their families, relatives, and the general public.** The worsening health crisis also puts a heavy burden on the emotional and mental well-being of the examinees on top of the taxing physical and academic demands of reviewing, which may cause them not to be in proper shape and health to take the exams.

In addition to these grave risks, we are also concerned about the possible additional financial and logistical burden on the PLE takers should the announcement be made at a later date, without elbow room for the examinees to adjust accordingly. As examinees are required to submit a certificate of quarantine or a negative RT-PCR swab test, while others will be traveling from distant places to examination sites, the resources used for these requisites may be wasted if no early announcement on the postponement is made. This is exemplified by the cancellation of the August 2021 Social Workers Licensure Examination in NCR only 2 days before the exam (6). Test takers expressed their deep anger and frustration on the sudden postponement which has wasted precious funds for their RT-PCR tests and travel costs. As we are facing an economic crisis on top of a health crisis, utmost regard and consideration should be given to these expenses so they do not add to the financial burden of the examinees.

It is in this light that we, the different medical and allied health councils and organizations, strongly appeal to the spirit of humanity and solidarity of the Board of Medicine to postpone the PLE until such time that the surge in the cases of COVID-19 has relatively waned. We believe that in the face of the recent surge of active cases and overall worsening health crisis in the country, the health, safety, and protection of all PLE takers should be given utmost importance. **Our future doctors deserve to be treated with the same compassion and understanding that they are taught to extend to all of their patients.** We hail them as the new heroes of our time as they will soon be physicians to the Filipino masses in the middle of a raging pandemic, but for them to best serve us in the frontlines or elsewhere, we must put primary importance to their safety and holistic well-being.

We forward the specific calls of our PLE takers:

- Give primary importance to the health and safety of PLE takers, examination proctors and administrators, and facility personnel;
- Release specific guidelines on the PLE for all community quarantine levels;
- Give standardized form of support to all PLE takers from all LGUs such as quarantine facilities, quarantine resources, and RT-PCR testing;
- Ensure financial, medical, and accommodation support in the health management of any PLE taker, examination proctors and administrators, and facility personnel in the case that they get infected with COVID-19;
- Give a prompt and early announcement on any updates on the PLE including the continuation of original dates of examination and possible postponement and rescheduling of the said examination

Lastly, we also reiterate our long-standing call to **strengthen and "raise the bar"** of our healthcare system. The health sector has unceasingly demanded a **scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic**: we call for mass testing, prompt contact tracing, and improvement of isolation facilities, provision of just compensation and benefits to healthcare workers, faster and equitable vaccine rollout, increased support to COVID-19 patients, and **ultimately, strengthening of the capacity of our health care system**.

#PostponeSeptPLE
#AnnounceExamCancellationsEarlyPRC
#HealthIsARight

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