



Philippines : Ill-prepared to Handle COVID 19 emergency

While the government assures the public affected by the lockdown with assistance and support, it presents no concrete plans to allay their fears. The private sector and well-meaning Filipinos have taken it upon themselves to fill in the lack of resources through their own donations even without publicity.

The government and DOH preparation for this health emergency is utterly wanting. We note that even before the COVID19 emergency, public health has been neglected for decades. The government favored privatization of health care services and health insurance schemes. Currently, there is no clear inventory of government health facilities, equipment and supplies for the COVID 19 patients. The 945 beds for COVID of which 390 are now occupied by COVID patients is insufficient. The World Health Organization estimates that COVID19 cases in the Philippines will reach to 75,000, 5% will suffer severe cases and 3% will die. Only patients with serious cases are admitted to hospitals and those with symptoms are advised to go home under home quarantine. While there are about 72 public hospitals under the Department of Health, only 209 mechanical ventilators are available.

Moreover, protection for frontline health workers in hospitals and health facilities is direly lacking. Many fend for themselves by buying their own personal protective equipment. The situation heightens the vulnerability of patients and the public. Who will take care of them when the frontline health workers' health also become compromised because of their exposure to infected patients? More and more health workers are quarantined as they themselves show symptoms of COVID 19 while nobly taking care of patients.

The public is advised to eat nutritious food to strengthen their immune system to fight COVID19. About 11 million workers and informal sector who rely on daily wage are challenged as they face a no-work, no-pay policy of employers because of enhanced community quarantine. They also face more health hazards because of congested homes and lack of water for basic handwashing hygiene. Because of financial difficulties, many are likely to ignore symptoms and skip testing for COVID19.

The national government has assigned local governments to do their part even as local government officials themselves lack the health training and resources to handle the COVID19 emergency.

Amidst the fear and confusion, well-meaning Filipinos, private schools and foundations have mobilized themselves by raising funds to buy masks and alcohol, and donating food to health personnel in hospitals, sans publicity.

During this public health emergency we call on the people to unite and call on the government to address the problem as a health concern. HEAD reiterates its calls:

- Allot sufficient health budget for public health using all available funds including contingency funds. Immediately release the supplemental funding of P1.6 billion to provide free services for COVID19 patients.
- Ensure the protection of health workers, immediately provide them with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). Also, provide them with transportation support to and from work amid the ban of public transportation as part of the total lockdown. Provide them with hazard pay benefits

- Conduct free mass testing in communities. Those with symptoms like sore throat, fever, especially those with pneumonia - whether moderate or severe - should be prioritized for testing. Provide free services to COVID19 patients.
- Educate the public on the prevention of COVID19 and care for infected patients. Strictly implement quarantine protocols using persuasion not coercion.
- Ensure adequate health facilities and equipment like ventilators, oxygen supply, isolation rooms in public hospitals for infected patients.
- Set up quarantine facilities in all cities, municipalities and national level. Strictly implement quarantine protocols.
- Develop a public health care system from the barangay level to national level. Set up health facilities nationwide that will handle dreaded diseases like the COVID19.
- Provide immediate economic support to affected sectors and communities.

As part of long term solution to public health emergencies like COVID 19, the government should abandon the neoliberal policies on health. Stop the privatization of government hospitals and health facilities. Also, the public health system should be unified or renationalized. The State should set up a unified health care system which should provide free, quality and comprehensive health care services to the people. (#)

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