

OPINION

Ensuring a steady supply of medicines amid the surge

Specific brands of medicines used to manage flu symptoms were reported to be out of stock in the past few days. Long queues were seen outside drugstores as people tried to secure medicines for fever, colds, and cough.

The hike in demand could be attributed to the heightened vigilance against the highly transmissible Omicron variant. Moreso, it could be due to the spike in coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases in Metro Manila and nearby provinces.

The Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP) assures the public that there is sufficient inventory. Anticipating a surge, PHAP member companies early this month, airlifted paracetamol and flu medicines to augment current stocks in the country.

On Jan. 10, the country recorded more than 33,000 fresh cases from a flat COVID-19 case trend in early December. On the same day, the OCTA Research group said the positivity rate in Metro Manila exceeded 50% (the World Health Organization recommends a positivity rate of 5% before reopening). OCTA predicted correctly that the country would record more than 20,000 new infections daily by Jan. 7.

The temporary shortage of certain brands of paracetamol is enough to cause difficulties for patients and their families. This emphasizes the need to work on the pharmaceutical supply security in the country, including those for COVID-related medicines.

Since the pandemic began, PHAP members have been working to make

both COVID and non-COVID medicines available to Filipinos during these challenging times. PHAP is closely coordinating with the government on pharmaceutical security, and provided recommendations to ensure the uninterrupted supply of medicines in the country.

The Food and Drug Administration has been working hard in reviewing and granting Emergency Use Approval (EUA) for medicines for use in mild, severe, and critical COVID-19 cases. Their work has been crucial in providing treatment options to medical practitioners, and choices for patients whether they are at government or private facilities.

Urgent discussions must also be initiated especially for medicines that have been granted EUAs by international health agencies. Candidate medicines that have promising outcomes must also be closely monitored.

Moreover, proactive supply planning for procurement, negotiation and stockpiling depending on the country's need must be given attention. Firm forecasts with guaranteed contracts to secure allocation will be important if we are to have these new medicines available amid global demand.

MEDICINE CABINET
TEODORO B. PADILLA

TEODORO B. PADILLA is the executive director of Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP), which represents the biopharmaceutical medicines and vaccines industry in the country. Its members are at the forefront of research and development efforts for COVID-19 and other diseases that affect Filipinos.



Sore throat? Stay home

By Brontë H. Lacsamana

DON'T DISREGARD a sore or scratchy throat, health experts said on Friday, as it may be an early sign of the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

Those with mild to moderate symptoms, like fever, colds, cough, body pains, headache, and sore throat should immediately isolate and use telemedicine services so as not to increase risk of transmission in public.

"If you start to have symptoms, do not go to work, do not ride on public transport, and do not go to the mall," said Dr. Teodoro J. Herbosa, special advisor of the National Task Force for COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019).

Asymptomatic, mild, and moderate patients must isolate for 10 days while severe and critical patients must isolate for 21 days, according to home quarantine guidelines released on Friday by the Department of Health in light of the rise in hospitalizations due to the surge in COVID-19 cases.

Household members should follow minimum public health standards at

home, like wearing face masks, proper hand hygiene, and physical distancing of at least one meter away from others.

With these protocols, an overwhelmed health system can be avoided, as hospital utilization is at 40% or 50%, according to Mr. Herbosa.

'CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM'

Based on past surges, the Philippines may reach its peak of coronavirus cases in January or February, according to a panel.

"Note that the mixture of the holiday season, ongoing Delta, and potential Omicron are factors that brought us to where we are today," said Dr. Benjamin G. Co, a pediatric infectious diseases expert, at a webinar on Jan. 7. He added that cautious optimism is the way to go, noting that the surge "should end somewhere."

On Monday, the country recorded its highest daily number of infections of more than 33,000. On New Year's Day, the Philippines saw over 3,600 cases, following an average of under 500 infections pre-holidays. The National Capital Region (NCR) is under alert level 3 until Jan. 15.

Since Omicron is the latest variant of concern, information is still limited as to whether vaccines will be effective against it. However, the currently available vaccines offer significant protection against severe disease and death, said Dr. Co.

"How to protect against Omicron? Reduce our risk of exposure to the virus by responsibly making sure that our mobility is well thought of," he said.

Fredegusto Guido P. David, a University of the Philippines scientist and OCTA research fellow, suggested that the dramatic increase in cases and "critical-level" positivity rate of over 50% in the NCR could indicate a similar situation as South Africa. There, the rise in cases was followed by a steep decrease.

"That's the best-case scenario for the Philippines," he said. "It's possible that we could be closing in on the peak but we just don't know."

On Jan. 9, Mr. David tweeted more cautious optimism: "We will know in the next few days if the positivity rate is indeed slowing down ... If the increase in positivity rate is slowing down, then the peak in the NCR might occur within the week. Let us hope that is the case."

US man recovering after 'breakthrough' pig heart transplant

CHICAGO — A US man with terminal heart disease was implanted with a genetically modified pig heart in a first-of-its-kind surgery, and three days later the patient is doing well, his doctors reported on Monday.

The surgery, performed by a team at the University of Maryland Medicine, is among the first to demonstrate the feasibility of a pig-to-human heart transplant, a field made possible by new gene editing tools.

If proven successful, scientists hope pig organs could help alleviate shortages of donor organs.

"This was a breakthrough surgery and brings us one step closer to solving the organ shortage crisis. There are simply not enough donor human hearts available to meet the long list of potential recipients," Dr. Bartley Griffith, who surgically transplanted the pig heart into the patient, said in a statement.

"We are proceeding cautiously, but we are also optimistic that this first-in-the-world surgery will

provide an important new option for patients in the future," Dr. Griffith added.

For 57-year-old David Bennett of Maryland, the heart transplant was his last option.

"It was either die or do this transplant. I want to live. I know it's a shot in the dark, but it's my last choice," Mr. Bennett said a day before his surgery, according to a statement released by the university.

To move ahead with the experimental surgery, the university obtained an emergency authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration on New Year's Eve through its compassionate use program.

"The FDA used our data and data on the experimental pig to authorize the transplant in an end-stage heart disease patient who had no other treatment options," said Dr. Muhammad Mohiuddin,

who heads the University's program on xenotransplantation — transplanting animal organs into humans.

About 110,000 Americans are currently waiting for an organ transplant, and more than 6,000 patients die each year before getting one, according to organdonor.gov.

Mr. Bennett's genetically modified pig heart was provided by Revivicor, a regenerative medicine company based in Blacksburg, Virginia.

On the morning of the surgery, the transplant team removed the pig's heart and placed it into a special device to preserve its function until the surgery.

Pigs have long been a tantalizing source of potential transplants because their organs are so similar to humans. A hog heart at the time of slaughter, for example, is about the size of an adult human heart. — Reuters

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