

App offers confidential care for HIV patients

By Brontë H. Lacsamana
Reporter

QUICKRES, a digital platform under a global initiative to end the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic by 2030, aims to deliver testing and healthcare services to persons living with HIV (PLHIV).

"The Philippines is part of a global effort towards ending HIV by the 95-95-95 fast-track targets, which means [getting] 95% of people tested, 95% [of positive cases] enrolling for treatment, and 95% [of those being treated] having the virus suppressed,"

said Teresita Marie P. Bagasao, director of Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) Project Philippines, at the app's launch on Feb. 16.

Citing epidemiologic data from the Department of Health (DoH), she pointed out that these percentages, as of December 2021, are at 63-63-95 in the Philippines (63% of PLHIV getting tested and knowing their HIV status, 63% of people who know their HIV-positive status on treatment, 95% of people on treatment with suppressed viral loads).

The QuickRes platform is also part of "Free to Be U," an HIV awareness campaign backed by DoH and community-based orga-

nizations that provide healthcare facilities for PLHIV.

Through the app, clients can set an appointment in pilot sites in Metro Manila, Central Luzon, and Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon). A nationwide online reservation system is among the project's long-term goals.

"QuickRes has a call-me-back feature and counselors can contact a person who books an appointment so that they can address all the other concerns of the client. The counselors are also trained to be client-centered," said Joven R. Santiago, EpiC Philippines technical advisor for social and behavior change communication.

For HIV case manager and counselor Anthony Louie V. David, case management and education regarding accessible services require more effort in the Philippines.

"People don't know that PhilHealth has packages for free viral load count tests and budget for cartridges for viral load aside from what DoH supplies," he said. "Viral load count is important to see the antiretroviral therapy's adherence on the body."

Mr. David added that he is a living example of treatment rendering HIV undetectable and untransmittable.

He and his boyfriend, who tested negative, are proof, too, that a serodiscordant relationship (PLHIV with a negative partner) is possible.

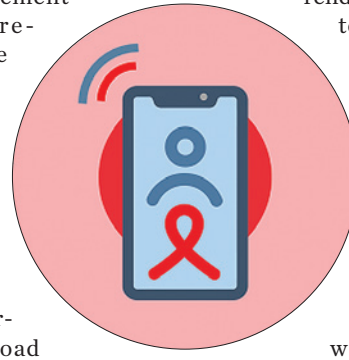
"We must share knowledge on how to handle HIV stigma and discrimination," he said, mentioning his own YouTube channel

PLHIV Diaries as his own way of doing so.

EpiC's Ms. Bagasao said that a "welcoming approach" toward the prevention, testing, and treatment of HIV should be the aim.

HIV prevention drugs such as pre-exposure prophylaxis and the tenofovir, lamivudine, dolutegravir combination are approved by the DoH and will be procured by the government.

Their distribution is being scaled up in the Philippines through donations from the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the US Agency for International Development, which are also funding the EpiC Project.



OPINION

Embracing innovation to benefit Filipino cancer patients, families

The biopharmaceutical industry is building a pipeline that is changing patients' lives and, hopefully, will transform cancer into just another chronic illness that does not carry a death sentence.

"We are seeing dramatic improvements in survival rates across different cancer types, including those common among Filipinos such

as breast, cervical, colorectal, lung, ovarian, and prostate cancer, as well as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma," said Dr. Diana M. Edralin, general manager of Roche Philippines and president of the Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP), at a Feb. 14 forum held in conjunction with the third anniversary of the enactment of the National Integrated Cancer Control Act (NICCA).

According to Dr. Edralin, with early detection, immediate and proper intervention, and treatment adherence, 6 out of 10 people diagnosed with these types of cancer today can

live five or more years compared to 3 out of 10 people in 1975. Seventy-three percent of recent cancer survival gains are attributable to treatment advances, including new medicines.

However, cancer drug development is a long and complex process. It takes approximately 14 years, more than 7 million work hours, over 6,500 experiments, and around 423 researchers to discover one revolutionary cancer medicine that eventually becomes the standard of care. And yet, there are also many failures. In the past 20 years, for the 115 cancer medicines approved, more than 1,300 projects were unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, Dr. Edralin explained, these research investments are all worth it as researchers build on knowledge gained from these setbacks. With the introduction of new medicines, we are now seeing progression-free survival for certain types of cancers. Progression-free survival is the length of time during and after

treatment that a patient survives without the cancer getting worse, she explained.

In a subgroup of lung cancer patients given a new type of therapy, the overall survival rate increased from 19 months to 60 months or 3.3 years. Over the past decade, the five-year survival rate of cancer patients in the US improved by more than half from 14.5% to 23.7% due to innovations in treatment and diagnostics.

"This is important because lung cancer is the second most common cancer and the number one cause of cancer-related deaths in the country. Imagine the impact if these newer medicines are easily accessible to every Filipino, regardless of age, gender or socioeconomic status," Dr. Edralin said.

It was underscored that there is a need to embrace innovation for the benefit of Filipino cancer patients, noting that countries such as the US, Germany, UK, Japan, and France, among others, where the highest number of new medicines are available are also experiencing the lowest death rates for cancer. To reduce

cancer deaths in the country, she highlighted the need to broaden the availability of new cancer medicines in the national formulary and PhilHealth benefit packages.

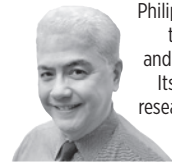
"Medicine availability is critical, and is the first step of access. We can change the medicine access availability narrative now with the tools provided for by NICCA. This could make a huge difference in providing Filipino patients access to much needed cancer medicines," said Dr. Edralin.

There are more than 1,300 cancer medicines and vaccines in development or under review by the US Food and Drug Administration, she added, noting that around 68% of medicines in the oncology pipeline are likely to be first-in-class medicines with new and unique mechanisms of action.

"We are starting to understand how cancer works at a molecular level. New drug molecules that target specific receptors and pathways may offer longer survival or even cure cancer," she said.

Dr. Edralin commended local academic and training institutions and investigators who enabled the participation of Filipino cancer patients in global clinical trials. She also lauded the Department of Health for adopting the first targeted therapy for breast cancer, the most common cancer among Filipino women since the 1980s. "This innovative treatment has addressed at least 35% of breast cancer cases and increased the number of survivors in the country. We hope that more of these innovations will be adopted, especially those that are already available in the Philippines."

TEODORO B. PADILLA is the executive director of the 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.



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