

# Bayer invests €1.3 billion in next-gen healthcare

PHARMACEUTICAL company Bayer AG announced on April 1 that it is investing more than €1.3 billion over the next three years in tackling “the challenges facing humanity” — including cancer, neurodegenerative disease, and agriculture’s environmental impact — through Leaps by Bayer, its impact investment unit.

“We stand at the dawn of a new age of innovation in the Life Sciences,” said Werner Baumann, chairman of the board of management of Bayer AG, in a statement.

Added Jürgen Eckhardt, head of Leaps by Bayer: “We will be able to continue on our successful path and provide funding for the brightest minds working on solutions that truly make a difference for people and the planet.”

Leap’s partners include Recursion, an AI (artificial intelligence)-focused company working to find drug treatments for lung fibrosis and other fibrotic diseases; and Mammoth Biosciences, which has CRISPR systems (molecular machineries that can change any letter in an organism’s deoxyribonucleic acid) that develop *in vivo* gene-editing therapies.

According to Jamie Metzl, a technology and healthcare futurist who spoke at the company’s Breakthrough Innova-



tion Forum, human creativity is one of the strongest forces in the universe.

“We must all start to think a little like science fiction writers, because we live in a world that will increasingly feel like science fiction,” he said, citing technologies that are improving at exponential rates.

“We are at a transition point in human history, and are using our new capabilities in genetics and biotechnology revolutions to renegotiate our relationship with the world around us,” he continued. “Our species now has the ability to recast the code of life.”

A critical driver of this application is moving healthcare to a world of personalized or precision healthcare from the perspective of generalized medicine.

“We’ll move from our current system — which we call healthcare, but is often-times symptom-based sick care — to a truer model of prediction and prevention,” said Mr. Metzl.

Another driver of this application is agriculture, with its current reliance on chemical fertilizers and engineered water systems. Mr. Metzl pointed out that chemical fertilizers account for 2% of global energy use, and 1.5% of greenhouse gas emissions.

“We are reaching the limits on sustainable land and water use... clearly, we need to increase yields while lowering agriculture’s environment and carbon footprint,” he added.

Bayer, which invests €2 billion per year for research and development in its Crop Science division, launched a biotech defense against corn rootworm — a pest responsible for €1 billion in crop damage per year — while reducing the need for crop protection. It also plans to bring a more weather-resistant corn hybrid to the market in 2023.

“The question is not technology either-or, but how best. It is not technology yes-or-no, but technology how best to benefit our world,” said Mr. Metzl. — **Patricia B. Mirasol**

## OPINION DoH to pilot colorectal cancer screening program

Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer and the fourth leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the country. Yet with early detection, colorectal cancer is one of the most preventable and treatable cancers.

This is why the Department of Health (DoH), in partnership with the World Health Organization, Philippine Society of Gastroenterology (PSG), and Philippine Society of Digestive Endoscopy, will pilot the National Colorectal Cancer Screening Program this year.

To be implemented in line with Republic Act No. 11215 or the National Integrated Cancer Control Act (NICCA), the screening program aims to reduce deaths due to colorectal cancer by promoting early detection through fecal immunochemical test (FIT) and colonoscopy.

The pilot screening sites are Mariano Marcos Memorial Hospital and Medical Center, East Avenue Medical Center, San Lazaro Hospital, Vicente Sotto Memorial Medical Center, Zamboanga City Medical Center, and Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital.

“The DoH National Colorectal Cancer Screening Program will benefit the vulnerable population of Filipinos aged 50 years and older. Those who test positive with FIT should undergo a colonoscopy. The FIT kits will be provided for free while the cost of the colonoscopy can be covered by PhilHealth or our Malasakit Centers,” said Dr. Clarito U. Cairo, Jr., program manager of the National Integrated Cancer Control program, DoH Disease Prevention and Control Bureau, at the opening ceremony of Philippine Digestive Health Week (PDHW) this March.

PDHW and National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month are celebrated in March.

FIT is a simple test that can be performed at home. Recommended yearly, it detects hidden blood in the stool, which can be an early sign of cancer. However, FIT cannot diagnose colorectal cancer. As such, individuals with positive FIT results should schedule a colonoscopy with a gastroenterologist.

A colonoscopy is an exam in which a long, flexible tube (colonoscope) is inserted into the rectum. A tiny video camera at the tip of the tube allows the gastroenterologist to view the inside of the entire colon and rectum to check for changes or abnormalities.

The UK National Health Service added that one is usually awake during a colonoscopy, and medicine will be offered to make the person going through the test more comfortable.

“Polyps are abnormal tissue growths in the colon and rectum. While most are benign or harm-

less, some polyps can become cancerous. It takes many years for polyps to develop into colorectal cancer, which provides an opportunity for cancer prevention through

polypectomy during colonoscopy. The gastroenterologist can safely remove polyps which are sent for histopathologic analysis to confirm whether these are cancerous or have the potential to transform into cancer,” said internist-gastroenterologist Dr. Dulcinea Balce-Santos, PSG public relations officer.

She added that repeat colonoscopy for surveillance of polyp recurrence is recommended based on the findings of the initial colonoscopy. Regular screening through FIT and colonoscopy are powerful tools in the prevention, early detection, and treatment of early-stage colorectal cancer.

Dr. Balce-Santos stressed that individuals can lower their risk for colorectal cancer by maintaining a healthy weight; engaging in regular physical activity; eating a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, and low in red and processed meats; and refraining from drinking alcohol and cigarette smoking.

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.



## SLMC adds parking slots, outpatient facilities

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ST. LUKE'S Medical Center-Quezon City (SLMC-QC) completed on March 29 the first phase of its three-phase redevelopment plan, which involved the construction of a five-story parking structure with a roof deck, a hemodialysis unit, outpatient department (OPD) clinics, and outpatient operating rooms.

The multi-level 14,000-square-meter structure provides more than 300 parking slots to augment existing parking facilities within the compound.

“Phase 1 of the redevelopment plan aims to improve the quality of healthcare to SLMC-QC patients by addressing areas of improvement and building on our strengths,” Dr. Arturo S. De La Peña, SLMC president, said at the topping off ceremony. “Through this initiative,

our patients will benefit from new and enhanced facilities that will cater to their needs.”

SLMC declined to comment on the total cost of Phase 1.

Phase 2, scheduled for completion in 2023, entails constructing house operation-related facilities, including a pharmacy, a sterile supply warehouse, and SLMC offices for nursing and engineering.

Phase 3, scheduled for completion in 2025, consists of a new hospital building with healthcare facilities for various specialties, including nuclear medicine, oncology, and cardiology. It will also house the Intensive Care Unit, Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, Main Operating Room Complex, and ancillary and diagnostic services. — **Patricia B. Mirasol**

## Meralco to power PLDT's largest hyperscale data center

The Manila Electric Co. (Meralco) has teamed up with the PLDT Group to ensure that the country's largest hyperscale data center will have reliable and high-quality electricity service once it starts operations.

Meralco is building a custom-designed substation on the site of VITRO Sta. Rosa, the telco's 11<sup>th</sup> hyperscale data center, which is currently being constructed in a five-hectare property in Laguna.

The Meralco substation will serve the dynamic power requirements of the hyperscale data center and will have the capability to scale-up and address the growing power demand of the facility over time through the installation of additional power banks.

This substation design will also provide resilient and flexible power to the data center, ensuring service continuity that goes beyond the standard requirements of the TIA-942 Rated 3 coverage.

“In a developing country like the Philippines, innovations become imperative to support and spur development. Meralco is honored to be part of this groundbreaking milestone of the PLDT Group, enabling more innovations to provide top-notch service to its clients,” said Meralco Senior Vice President and Head of Networks Ronnie L. Aperocho.

“The new Meralco substation is designed to support the distinct power requirements of this VITRO Sta. Rosa hyperscale data center through the delivery of safe, adequate, reliable, and high-quality electricity service, consistent with our commitment to our 7.4 million customers,” Aperocho added.

PLDT and Smart FVP & Head of Enterprise Business Group and ePLDT Chief Commercial Officer Jojo G. Gendrano, for his part, said: “This partnership with Meralco will assure our customers of unparalleled service. With this, coupled with



**MERALCO TO POWER PLDT'S 11<sup>TH</sup> AND LARGEST VITRO HYPERSCALE DATA CENTER LOCATED IN STA. ROSA, LAGUNA.** Present during the groundbreaking ceremony last March 18 were (from L-R): RED Engineering Regional Director for Asia-Pacific Martin Webb, DICT Regional Director Cheryl C. Ortega, Meralco President and CEO Atty. Ray C. Espinosa, PLDT and Smart President and CEO Alfredo S. Panlilio, PEZA Director General Charito B. Plaza, Laguna Governor Ramil L. Hernandez, Sta. Rosa City Mayor Arlene B. Arcillas, and PLDT FVP and Head of Digital Office Viboy S. Genuino. (Photo courtesy of PLDT)

ePLDT's deep Data Center operational experience & expertise, we are able to provide our valued customers with world-class colocation services.”

As a power-intensive facility, PLDT recognizes the environmental impact of operating a data center of this capacity and has therefore integrated sustainability into its design and operations.

“Beyond providing the massive power requirements of the hyperscale data center, Meralco also commits to support PLDT's thrust to utilize renewable energy (RE) and energy efficient technologies to make the data center operations truly sustainable,” Meralco President and CEO Atty. Ray C. Espinosa said.

“This is also timely as Meralco has already started shifting towards delivering clean energy to our customers beginning with our commitment to source 1,500 MW of our power requirements in the next five years from renewables, and to build 1,500 MW of RE generation capacity by 2027,” he added.

VITRO Sta. Rosa is designed to be energy efficient

utilizing the latest innovations in cooling and power redundancy. It is Tier-3 certified and Tier-4 ready, and has the highest level of network diversity and resilience with at least three fiber routes from PLDT, augmented by routes from other carriers.

“The PLDT Group is one with the nation in building a digitally advanced Philippines and making our country the next hyperscaler destination in Asia Pacific. With VITRO Sta. Rosa, we aim to set the benchmark in infrastructure resilience, operational excellence, global competitiveness, and world-class sustainability,” PLDT President and CEO Alfredo S. Panlilio said.

“A facility of this caliber ensures the best possible customer experience not only for our hyperscale clients, but also for the Filipino end-users consuming their services. We at the PLDT Group are committed to providing world-class services to our global enterprise clients and to enabling the digital transformation of the country and the Filipino people,” Panlilio concluded.

### Inflation, from SI/1

“Under these circumstances, the BSP will closely monitor the emerging risks to the outlook for inflation and growth, and remain vigilant against possible second-round effects from supply-side pressures or any shifts in the public's inflation expectation,” Mr. Diokno said.

Global crude oil prices have surged above \$100 a barrel since Russia invaded Ukraine in late February due to supply concerns. Russia is the world's second-largest exporter of crude oil.

Since the start of the year, local prices of gasoline, diesel, and kerosene posted a net increase of P16, P26, and P24.10 per liter, respectively.

PSA data showed inflation of heavily weighted food and non-alcoholic beverages picked up to 2.6% in March from 1.2% in February.

Housing, water, electricity, gas, and other fuels rose to 6.2% from 4.8%, while transport quickened to 10.3% from 8.8%.

The PSA also reported electricity and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) prices rose 18% and 26.5%, respectively, in March, from 13.5% and 17.6% in February, respectively.

Meanwhile, the inflation as experienced by the bottom 30% income households — at constant 2012 prices — quickened to 3.3% last month from 2.7% in February, but lower than 5.5% in March 2021.

Year to date, inflation as experienced by poor households settled at 3%.

The statistics agency targets to release the 2018-based inflation data for the bottom 30% by December 2022, as soon as it finishes conducting its commodity and outlet survey, National Statistician Claire Dennis S. Mapa said at a press briefing on Tuesday.

The nationwide commodity and outlet survey provides the basis for the identification of the market basket at different income levels — upper 70% and bottom 30%. It was last conducted in 2008.

The National Economic and Development Authority, for its

part, said the government has taken steps to address the inflationary pressures brought by the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

“We have been proactively monitoring the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict,” Socio-economic Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick T. Chua said in a statement.

Analysts said that March marks the start of a steady increase in consumer prices in the coming months.

Security Bank Corp. Chief Economist Robert Dan J. Roces said in an e-mail interview that the continued rise in fuel prices may spill over to fares and wages.

“Based on the current trajectory, headline inflation may exceed the central bank's target band beginning this second quarter — which is likely the peak quarter — before tempering and remaining near the 4.0% area for the balance of the year,” Mr. Roces said.

“As there is scope for oil prices to continue to remain elevated with more forthcoming sanctions against Russia, this points to upside risks to the inflation outlook, which we currently see averaging 4.2% for the year,” he added.

China Banking Corp. Chief Economist Domini S. Velasquez said oil prices have been increasing even before the geopolitical tension between Russia and Ukraine.

“We suspect higher input costs, such as that of elevated fuel prices, have already trickled to food inflation, such as in the prices of meat, fish, and vegetables,” she said in a Viber message.

“Continued elevated global commodity prices, worsening of supply chain bottlenecks due to lockdowns in China, secondary round effects of fuel prices on food products and manufactured goods will push up inflation next month,” she added.

In a press release, Bank of the Philippine Islands said: “Upside risks to inflation continue to build up and most likely we have not seen the peak yet.” — *with inputs from Luz Wendy T. Noble*

### BSP, from SI/1

Inflation jumped to 4% in March, near the upper end of the BSP's projected range of 3.3-4.1% for the month and still within the 2-4% target band for the year.

“This means that the BSP must be prepared to take action to prevent price pressures from broadening and becoming more entrenched which could translate to second-round effects,” Mr. Diokno said.

In March, the BSP kept rates at record lows as it cited the need to keep supporting the economy at a time of increased uncertainties to the growth and inflation outlook. At the same time, it acknowledged that economic recovery has already gained traction.

The Monetary Board now expects inflation to breach the target at 4.3% for 2022 from 3.7% previously, citing the surge in oil and commodity prices due to the Russia-Ukraine war.

“Now, on the timing of the disengagement strategy, I think we are still on track despite the Russia-Ukraine crisis. We're still looking at the second half of the year for our normalization [of rates] strategy,” he said.

Mr. Diokno said their eventual normalization of policy setting will be supported by firmer signs of a “durable economic recovery.”

The key policy rate is currently at a record low of 2%, and Mr. Diokno has earlier said this could reach 2.75% by 2023.

For UnionBank of the Philippines, Inc. Chief Economist Ruben Carlo O. Asuncion, a preemptive rate hike from the central bank could do “more good than harm.”

“I believe that it would be good for monetary policy to anticipate right away and hike rates, albeit gradually, to help tame the actual rise in prices,” Mr. Asuncion said in a Viber message.

Meanwhile, Security Bank Corp. Chief Economist Robert Dan J. Roces said non-monetary policy measures like fuel subsidies and wider food imports are crucial to respond to inflationary pressures.

“However, we think the BSP may also be standing ready to raise the benchmark rate earlier than planned as a form of preemptive strike to further moderate inflation should price pressures start to become too compelling to ignore,” he said.

The Monetary Board will have its next policy review on May 19. Its first policy-setting meeting in the second half is on June 23.

Meanwhile, Mr. Diokno said they have extended another P300-billion zero-interest loan to the National Government.

“They recently renewed it and it will be paid by June 12. So, by the time the new administration takes over, there will be no more advances from the central bank,” he said.

A decision on future direct advances will be made by the next administration.

This is the sixth time the BSP extended direct advances to the National Government since the pandemic. It is lower than the P540 billion which was extended thrice in 2021, reflecting the gradual withdrawal of the BSP's budgetary support to the National Government.