

OPINION

Caring for mothers and children

Ensuring access for all people to their preferred family planning methods advances several human rights including the right to life and liberty, freedom of opinion and expression and the right to work and education, as well as bringing significant health and other benefits, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Family planning is the information, means, and methods that allow individuals to decide if and when to have children. This includes a wide range of contraceptives such as pills, implants, intrauterine devices, surgical procedures that limit fertility, and barrier methods such as condoms, as well as non-invasive methods such as the calendar method and abstinence. Family planning also includes information about how to become pregnant when it is desirable, as well as treatment of infertility.

Use of contraception prevents pregnancy-related health risks for women, the WHO explains. When births are separated by less than two years, the infant mortality rate is 45% higher than it is when births are two to three years apart, and 60% higher than it is when births are four or more years apart. Family planning offers a range of potential non-health benefits that encompass expanded education opportunities and empowerment for women, and sustainable population growth and economic development for countries.

By using safe and effective modern family planning methods, couples can achieve proper birth spacing. The Department of Health (DoH) recommends having children three to five years apart, which is best for the health of the mother, her child, providing the whole family with many benefits.

Family planning also enables the mother to regain her health after delivery. It gives her enough time and energy to care for and spend bonding moments with her husband and children, as well as more time for her personal advancement. When she is ill, family planning gives her enough time for treatment and recovery. With family planning, mothers are more likely to stay healthy and, in turn, deliver healthy babies. Moreover, with proper birth spacing, couples are able to give all the attention, security, love, and care their children deserve.

Family planning lightens the burden of the father in supporting his family. It makes his responsibility of providing his children's basic needs such as food, shelter, education, and a better future easier. It also gives him more time to spend with his family and for his personal advancement, as well as

enough time for treatment and recovery if he gets sick.

In 2020, a total of 8,085,000 Filipinos used modern family planning methods, a 6% increase from 2019, according to the DoH. However, the agency also received reports of dropouts which can be attributed to difficulties in accessing family planning services due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions and lockdowns.

This is why the DoH and the Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM) have renewed their call to stakeholders, particularly local government units (LGUs), to continue the provision of family planning as one of the vital and essential health services, especially during the health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The DoH and POPCOM provide a number of family planning measures, including the home delivery of three months' worth of supplies of family planning commodities for those who have enlisted to the family planning program.

Health centers are also open to accommodate women who wish to avail of injectables and subdermal implants to ensure the duration of the effect of the contraceptives. POPCOM also has active helplines and chat features which may be sourced through its Usap Tayo sa Family Planning Facebook page: [facebook.com/UsapTayoSaFP](https://www.facebook.com/UsapTayoSaFP).

A number of research-based pharmaceutical companies and their foundations are involved in partnerships that train nurses, midwives, and health educators to provide skilled assistance during pregnancy, labor, and delivery.

Aside from creating programs to reduce common risks like post-partum hemorrhage and preeclampsia, they also donate rehydration solutions, antibiotics, multivitamins, and nutritional supplements to improve maternal and child health.

They also help strengthen health infrastructure by building birth centers and health clinics, equipping hospitals and providing them with essential medicines. Mobile healthcare field clinics help provide greater access to medical and primary healthcare and save many lives in areas that are far from regular healthcare facilities.

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.



Virology institute a must as viruses found in PHL have 'pandemic potential'

By Patricia B. Mirasol
Reporter

THE PHILIPPINES should establish its own virology and vaccine institute considering that the country has three viruses that are in the same family as pathogens identified by the World Health Organization as having "pandemic potential" — with a possible fourth on the horizon, according to a wildlife biologist.

The three viruses, all found in bats, are the *Reston ebolavirus*, the antibodies of which were found between 2008 and 2009 in bats captured in the forests of Diliman, Quezon City, and Atimonan, Quezon; bat coronavirus, the antibodies of which were found in 66.5% of bats across five areas in Region IV-A, according to a 2012 study; and the henipavirus, which caused an outbreak with a mortality rate of between 45% and 70% in Sultan Kudarat in 2014 (horse-to-human and human-to-human transmission occurred; the most likely source of horse infection was fruit bats).

The fourth — a poxvirus (the family of viruses that causes monkeypox) — was found in a survey of Biak-na-Bato National Park in Bulacan in March 2020, a few days

before the country was locked down due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

"It would be the first record in Asia," said Phillip A. Alviola, a wildlife biologist and an associate professor at UP Los Baños' Institute of Biological Sciences, who was part of the team that found genetic evidence of the presence of the poxvirus.

"We haven't yet found any viruses from bats that have made the transmission jump to humans but we did find ... SARS CoV-2-related coronaviruses in bats. The similarity goes up to more than 90% to SARS CoV-2," he said at an Oct. 10 forum organized by the National Academy of Science and Technology.

The findings of the survey conducted by Mr. Alviola's team will be published this year.

HEALTH SECURITY

Establishing a virology and vaccine institute will also help address issues such as climate change, disease emergence, disasters, habitat degradation, urbanization, poverty, and competition within the ecosystem, said Noel Lee J. Miranda, an independent regional consultant who specializes in emerging pandemic threats.

"Biodiversity fragility drives zoonotic disease [diseases from animals] emer-

gence. That's why I'm saying let's not just focus on diagnostics, vaccines, and therapeutics," he said.

"We need to collectively address pandemic risks and emerging pandemic threats at their source," he added, citing as an example the unregulated wildlife markets where wild animals are traded and sold.

While the number of bat and bird species in Southeast Asia makes it vulnerable to zoonotic diseases, it may also hold the key to the solution. "Our rich biodiversity is still not well understood, and therefore remains untapped for its full benefits for health and wellness," said Theresa Munda S. Lim, executive director of the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity.

The virology and vaccine institute will coordinate research efforts and act as a lead agency, said Dr. Jaime C. Montoya, executive director of the Department of Science and Technology Philippine Council for Health Research and Development.

"We hope this can be further supported and institutionalized through appropriate legislation," he said.

The Bases Conversion and Development Authority has allocated a five-hectare land in New Clark City for the construction of the proposed virology and vaccine institute.

Singapore develops rapid COVID-19 immunity test kit

By Brontë H. Lacsamana
Reporter

SCIENTISTS from the Singapore-MIT Alliance for Research and Technology (SMART) and Nanyang Technological University Singapore (NTU Singapore) developed a test kit that can determine one's immunity against coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in 10 minutes.

The rapid test kit measures levels of neutralizing antibodies against COVID-19 and its variants from just a drop of blood.

"Our study proves that our new test kit can be a powerful tool, allowing healthcare organizations to screen people and determine their vaccination needs," said Peter Preiser, co-lead principal investigator at SMART Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) group and associate vice-president for biomedical sciences at NTU Singapore, in a statement.

"This will help allay some people's fears that they will be 'over-vaccinated with a booster,' since the results will inform them accurately if they are well-protected against COVID-19 or not," he said.

The kit can also be easily adapted for new variants of concern in the future since it is "low-cost, fast, and has up to 93% accuracy," according to the team. The test findings are described in the related paper published in the *Microbiology Spectrum* journal.

The low costs and quick results are possible because the kit uses a paper-based assay coated with chemicals that bind to antibodies.

The team predicts it will pave the way for personalized vaccination, where people are only given vaccinations and booster shots when necessary, based on antibody levels.

"Depending on the country or jurisdiction, different evaluations for the test need to be conducted," said Dr. Megan McBee, scientific director of the SMART AMR research group, in an e-mail to *BusinessWorld*.

The SMART spin-off company Thrixen is looking into necessary evaluations, manufacturing, and distribution options.

In Singapore, the test evaluation process can take several months to a year. And once data and production details are submitted to regulators, it could take another year to bring the test to market without emergency use authorization.

The rapid COVID-19 immunity test kit is ideal for governments and healthcare organizations struggling to manage limited vaccine resources, said Dr. McBee.

She added that the test can be developed and adapted for use to tackle other diseases beyond COVID-19.

"Think instant diagnostics, where a doctor is able to test a patient's response to a viral disease which would allow them to recommend the right course of treatment there and then. This would be hugely beneficial to everyday healthcare, and we are just at the cusp of exploring the possibilities and applications," she said.

PSE sets trading suspension on Boulevard Holdings shares

THE PHILIPPINE Stock Exchange (PSE) has imposed a trading suspension on shares in Boulevard Holdings, Inc. starting on Oct. 14 after the company failed to submit its annual report on the extended deadline.

Boulevard Holdings informed its shareholders on Tuesday that it will not be able to meet the extended deadline of submission of its reportorial requirements on Oct. 13.

"The audit of the consolidated audited financial statement is still in process and we estimate to submit the report on or before the end of October 2022," the firm said.

The company also said that more personnel are helping to complete the report to meet its reportorial requirements with the PSE and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).

According to the PSE disclosure notice, Boulevard Holdings "has not complied with the structured reportorial requirements of the Exchange under Article VII, Section 17.2 in relation to Section 17.8 of the Consolidated Listing and Disclosure Rules."

It added that if the company is not able to comply before Oct. 14, a trading suspension will be imposed on its shares.

Article VII, Section 17.2 of the Consolidated Listing and Disclosure Rules states that listed firms should file with the PSE their annual report 105 days after the end of their fiscal year or as prescribed by the SEC.

Section 17.8 states that if an issuer fails to submit the required report, the PSE will impose a basic fine based on the scale of fines for non-compliance.

The PSE will also impose a daily fine for each day of non-compliance for a period of 15 calendar days.

If the issuer fails to comply before the 15 days end, the PSE is to warn the issuer and the trading participants of the firm's non-compliance which will result in the automatic suspension of the trading of its shares.

The suspension will run for a maximum period of three months during which the daily fine will not be applied.

Last year, Boulevard Holdings also received a trading suspension notice from the PSE after it failed to submit its annual report for the fiscal year ending May 31, 2021.

On the stock market on Tuesday, shares in the company declined by 3.7% to P0.052 apiece. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

CTA denies Lepanto's P18.3-M VAT refund claim

THE COURT of Tax Appeals (CTA) upheld its denial of Lepanto Consolidated Mining Co.'s petition to annul its alleged recess input value-added tax (VAT) worth P18.3 million for 2010.

In a 12-page decision dated Oct. 6 and made public on Oct. 10, the CTA full court said the mining firm failed to raise new arguments in its appeal.

"Accordingly, the court in division correctly dismissed the petition before it for lack of jurisdiction," according to the ruling penned by Associate Justice Ivy F. Reyes-Fajardo.

The tribunal noted that the CTA Third Division's previous decision had already reached finality when the current appeal was presented before the court.

It added that the commissioner of internal revenue's (CIR) inaction on the claim during the 120-day period mandated under law made the tax assessment unappealable.

Under the country's tax code, when the CIR denies or fails to act on a claim for refund, the taxpayer is given 30 days from the receipt of an adverse decision or ruling to file a petition for review with the CTA. — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**

FULL STORY



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Go Negosyo founder Joey Concepcion is encouraging Filipino small and medium enterprises to step up in the ASEAN region, saying that expanding their sights and taking steps to compete in the region will help the country achieve more inclusive growth.

Concepcion, who is ASEAN Business Advisory Council Chair for the Philippines, said that cooperation in helping MSMEs has been growing in the region, including the active sharing of teaching modules for MSMEs among ASEAN member-countries through programs like the ASEAN Mentorship for Entrepreneurs Network, and activities that promote global competitiveness such as the ASEAN Business Awards.

He said that these efforts help in making the region's MSMEs a more prominent segment of the world economy. In the region, like in the Philippines, MSMEs account for as much as 99.9 percent of total establishments. They contribute as much as 85 percent of total employment, and as much as 44.6 percent to GDP, according to ASEAN estimates.

"They are crucial to the economic development of both the country and the region," Concepcion said. "Beyond that, MSMEs play an important part in our goal for inclusive growth because they are present in

cities and provinces," he said.

Further, he urged the country's SMEs to raise their profile in the region by participating in regional competitions, such as the upcoming annual ASEAN Business Awards 2022. The competition is organized by the ASEAN Business Advisory Council, and aims to recognize outstanding and successful ASEAN enterprises contributing to ASEAN's economic growth and prosperity. The award recognizes outstanding performance among the eight ASEAN Economic Community Priority Integration Sectors, including Tourism, Logistics, Real estate, Textiles, Healthcare, Handicraft Fintech, and Agri-based Products.

To qualify for the awards, nominees must be an ASEAN-incorporated enterprise with at least 40 percent ASEAN-owned equity, and should have been in operation for a minimum of three years (for SMEs) to five (for large companies) years. Applications are free of charge and can be accessed at bit.ly/ABA2022Ph, or aba2022.ph@gmail.com.

"We have so many SMEs who demonstrate innovation, and by the nature of their business, contribute to value-added activities and generate jobs for their communities," said Concepcion.