

Treat obesity as chronic disease, not lack of will

By Patricia B. Mirasol *Reporter*

OBESITY should be recognized and treated as a chronic disease, according to a consensus paper for the management and care of obesity in South and Southeast Asia.

“By fundamentally recognizing obesity as a chronic disease, we aim to shift a variety of erroneous beliefs that, for example, obesity results from solely a lack of willpower leading to poor lifestyle choices, or that it should be regarded merely as a risk factor for other conditions, to acknowledging the science of obesity,” said Dr. Tham Kwang Wei, lead author of the consensus and secretary of the Asia-Oceania Association for the Study of Obesity (AOASO), in an Oct. 20 statement.

“When we approach obesity as a chronic disease with a propensity for relapse and progression,” Dr. Wei added, “we not only enable the provision of a whole-systems approach for effective prevention and treatment for the long-term, but also shift the focus on PwO [people living with obesity] and combat the stigma and discrimination associated with weight, which impedes PwO in seeking appropriate care.”

Titled “Obesity in South and Southeast Asia — A new consensus on care and management,” the paper released Oct. 19 lists 42 preliminary recommendations developed by medical experts from the Philippines, Bangladesh, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam.

“We have not really solved the problem of chronic energy deficiency [a condition characterized by low body weight and possibly limited physical capacity due to food deprivation], and yet we added on overweight and obesity to our problems,” said Dr. Mia C. Fojas, one of two Filipinos on the panel and an endocrinologist and senior lecturer at the University of the Philippines-College of Medicine.

Chronic energy deficiency and obesity and overweight were at almost equal prevalence three decades ago, she said at a recent press briefing.

The Philippines, she added, is drawing up its clinical practice guidelines for obesity.

“Our culture in one that revolves around food, we are proud of our food. Our diet is also high in carbohydrates with high rice consumption, for example,” Dr. Fojas said in an e-mail to *BusinessWorld*. “Also important to note is the general notion that being overweight is ‘healthy,’ specially in children, these probably coming for the times when malnutrition was prevalent.”

Enough cultural and social demographic similarities exist to justify a shared effort in treating obesity, according to Brian Oldfield, co-chair of the consensus and president of AOASO, which led the development of the consensus through a grant from the Southeast Asia office of pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk.

“It is our hope that with clear definitions and recommendations, we are one step closer to optimum care for people living with obesity in South

and Southeast Asia,” Mr. Oldfield said in a statement.

Obesity is a complex, progressive, and relapsing chronic disease that affects adults and children. It is caused by factors such as metabolism, dietary habits, and psychosocial conditions such as stress and depression. It is not caused by inadequate willpower, according to the consensus.

Challenges specific to South and Southeast Asia are the double burden of over- and undernutrition, the varied quality of obesity care, cultural nuances, and stigma.

The World Obesity Federation predicted that the prevalence of obesity worldwide would double between 2010 and 2030. This is likely an underestimation in South and Southeast Asia, the consensus pointed out, as adults and children of Asian descent experience obesity at lower levels of body mass index (BMI) compared to the cut-off points for global estimations.

In the Philippines, the BMI cut-off points used to identify overweight and obesity are 23.0 kg/m² and 25.0 kg/m², respectively. The global standards are 25.0-29.9 kg/m² for overweight, and 30.0 kg/m² and above for obesity.

Obesity prevalence among Filipino adults aged 20-59 years old was at 9.3% between 2018 to 2019. The prevalence for overweight and obesity for Filipino children aged 10-19 years was 11.6% by 2019.

The consensus was presented at the International Congress of Obesity in Melbourne on Oct. 19. It was submitted in *Obesity Reviews* in July and is still awaiting publication.

OPINION

Innovating and collaborating to improve access to medicines

When it comes to medicine access, every country faces diverse and unique challenges relating to awareness, acceptability, availability, affordability, adherence, and advocacy — especially with the pandemic adding complexity to these issues.

The Access to Medicines Index, a program by the Access to Medicines Foundation, emphasized that the pharmaceutical industry, in collaboration with the global health community, plays an important role in responding to global health priorities, developing life-saving innovative medicines or vaccines, expanding access to already existing pharmaceuticals, and forging new partnerships to promote sustainable, long-term access to medicines.

The Index analyzed how 20 of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies are addressing access to medicine in 106 low- and middle-income countries for 82 diseases, conditions, and pathogens.

In its 2021 report, the Index said that pharmaceutical companies continue to inch forward in addressing access to medicine in low- and middle-income countries. These companies are GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis AG, Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, Sanofi, Takeda Pharmaceutical, AstraZeneca, Merck KGaA, Roche, Novo Nordisk, Eisai, Boehringer Ingelheim, Bayer AG, Astellas, and Merck & Co. (MSD) among others.

In a recent virtual event, top Novartis executives spoke about the Swiss pharmaceutical company’s access initiatives and the private and public sectors have to work together to improve global health.

“For many years now, Novartis has been conducting periodic materiality assessments to find out what societies expect from our company. The response has been consistent: societies expect socially responsible pharma companies to innovate to advance the standard of care and make this innovation accessible as early as possible and as broadly as possible. In other words, derive the maximum societal benefit from the innovation,” said Dr. Lutz Hegemann, president of Global Health and Sustainability at Novartis.

Dr. Hegemann stressed that innovating and promoting access to medicines are intrinsically linked. “The pharmaceutical industry needs to redefine how we look at our core business, which intrinsically should include access to medicines. It would be a missed opportunity and ethically and morally incorrect if pharmaceutical companies focus only

on marketing and donating medicines. We have an obligation to go beyond that.”

The major challenges in public health and global health cannot be addressed by one sector alone. During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Dr. Hegemann said that the world saw the power of cross-sectoral collaboration that allowed the pharmaceutical industry and stakeholders to deliver effective vaccines at record-breaking timelines.

“Conversations among regulators, payers, clinicians, and patient organizations are often siloed. What the pharma industry can do is facilitate a more integrated discussion among these key actors to make sure they are communicating and working with each other,” said Haseeb Ahmad, president of Novartis Europe.

“At the end of the day, it is the patient that matters most. Being patient-focused, the pharma industry can bring

together stakeholders to the table so that we can move forward in enhancing access to medicines,” said Racey Muchilwa, country president and head of Novartis Sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr. Hegemann shared what he observed at the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly held this September in New York. “Whether you spoke to representatives of governments, UN organizations, civil society, professional society, or the private sector, there was a clear desire to collaborate more closely in addressing some of the global health issues we are currently facing.”

The Novartis Access Principles have strategies that include adopting innovative pricing and access models, refocusing research and development based on society’s healthcare needs, and supporting approaches to strengthen healthcare systems.

“We certainly don’t have all the answers yet, but we are very willing to work with partners to pilot new approaches,” said Dr. Hegemann.

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.



Pfizer launches biosimilar drug for breast cancer in PHL market

BIOPHARMACEUTICAL company Pfizer recently introduced a trastuzumab biosimilar as an affordable option for Filipinos seeking treatment for an aggressive type of breast cancer.

The biosimilar, approved this March by the Food and Drug Administration of the Philippines, is an innovative treatment option designed to treat specific types of HER2 (human epidermal growth factor receptor 2) positive breast cancers and stomach cancers.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the Philippines, especially among women. According to a study conducted by the University of the Philippines’ Institute of Human

Genetics, National Institute of Health, 189 in every 100,000 Filipinos are diagnosed with cancer and four Filipinos die every hour or 96 cancer patients every day.

“The entry of Pfizer’s biosimilar medicines in the Philippine market is a very positive development. Our biosimilar products have received regulatory approval based on the overall assessment of similarity to an existing biologic medicine. Pfizer uses robust protocols to ensure the same high-quality standards are maintained in its biosimilars as its biologics throughout every stage of the manufacturing process,” said Dr. Waleed Al Morsi Mohamed El Baramawy, senior director

of oncology medical affairs at Pfizer’s emerging markets business unit, in an Oct. 24 statement.

Pfizer’s biosimilar brand is significantly lower in price than the equivalent reference medication in the market, according to Dr. Maximino G. Bello III, head of oncology at De Los Santos Medical Center and associate professor of medicine at St. Luke’s Medical Center College of Medicine — William H. Quasha Memorial.

“The financial component of breast cancer in the Philippines is very challenging and cancer can be a significant economic burden for the Filipinos leading to financial difficulties to the families,” he added.

Integrator,
from SI/1

Two years after AMTI was founded, Mr. Cua joined the company as general manager. He recalled being selected because the investors were not just looking for a professional manager to run the company but because they wanted a competitive individual with an entrepreneurial mindset. At the time, AMTI’s path for growth was slow and limited due to its niche positioning as a one-brand company.

Mr. Cua started AMTI’s journey to become a multi-brand company, offering different international computer brands to provide customers with more choices to suit their preferences and budget.

AMTI’s next goal was to grow its market share in the PC market, but it faced challenges due to increasing competition and declining margins. Mr. Cua’s first solution was to diversify and go into events management, but this was a mistake.

“It wasn’t close to what we were good at. I then realized that I had to change the company culture and build a foundation and that I should just stick to what we know, which is technology,” he said.

One of his strategies against competitors was always to have a unique service or innovation for their customers. While the rest were selling hardware, Mr. Cua was already selling network solutions simultaneously.

To bring the company’s services outside Manila, Mr. Cua had the idea of creating a Technology Alliance Partner (TAP) program. TAP is a by-invitation program for small and established local IT companies in major cities, such as Cebu and Davao. AMTI trains its partners for onsite service and after-sales support for its products. The company also set up an automated trouble ticketing system for its partners.

“Before, if you were in the province and something needed repair, you had to send it to Manila,” he said “This makes it easier for our customers to avail of tech support.”

Mr. Cua described AMTI as a diversified company offering ICT products and services, and a digital transformation enabler. “We are so diversified today that we are like a mall. We almost have it all except for software development,” he said.

What differentiates AMTI from its competitors is its people or “AMTIZENS,” Mr. Cua said. The company’s most significant strength is building an ecosystem of diverse professionals, regardless of background, who work towards a single goal of providing products, technologies, services, and the digital transformation needs of their clients.

Always looking ahead, he started the company’s digital transformation journey in response to the worsening traffic situation in Metro Manila. “No one believed in work from anywhere during that time,” he said.

AMTI started experimenting with remote work as early as 2018, setting up satellite offices so employees could have more productive hours delivering client services. As a result, it overhauled and automated its internal processes, making them cloud-ready and embracing the new way of doing business. This early investment in digital transformation allowed AMTI to operate the business as

usual during the strict lockdowns and serve their client’s needs, especially in the global business process outsourcing and financial sectors. In addition, AMTI introduced managed services, which enable companies to accelerate their workforce and digital transformation initiatives by using the latest devices, software, and infrastructure by subscribing to these services. This comes in operating expenses form, allowing companies to save their precious capital and does not require significant technical workforce. It also allows customers to concentrate on their core business functions to deliver better business outcomes and innovations.

Mr. Cua’s goal for AMTI is to be the country’s go-to company for innovative technological solutions. AMTI has delivered impactful projects to the government, such as the National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction, where the system reduces leakage and corruption at the local levels and allows the allocation of scarce resources to deserving poor Filipinos.

The company also trained and equipped regional offices of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources with ground penetrating radar systems, allowing them to survey land areas for sinkholes and cavities. These systems were also used to identify illegally installed drainage pipes in Boracay, saving the whole island from further pollution and deterioration.

The next goal of AMTI is to grow significantly by 2025. Mr. Cua is constantly looking for new technologies, partnerships, and solutions worldwide to sustain this growth. Mr. Cua knows that technology and service businesses are dynamic and continuously changing, so he invests in partnerships, people training, building infrastructure, sales, engineering, and project management capabilities to support growth and to prepare the company for any eventuality.

Throughout the many growth phases of AMTI, Mr. Cua’s vision has remained the same, relying on the ingenuity of Filipinos.

“Filipinos are great at technology. It’s been my calling to set up a strong and globally competitive business here so that our citizens don’t have to leave the country,” he said. “I believe there will come a time when they stop seeking opportunities outside the Philippines and instead focus on seeking greener pastures locally and being with their loved ones.”

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The winners of the Entrepreneur Of The Year Philippines 2022 will be announced on Nov. 21 in an awards banquet at the Grand Hyatt Manila. The winner will represent the country in the World Entrepreneur Of The Year 2023 in Monte Carlo, Monaco in June 2023. The Entrepreneur Of The Year program is produced globally by Ernst & Young (EY).

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