

start of the century and in 2012, respectively. But it is more communicable, as shown by its rapid spread.

SARS killed a 10<sup>th</sup> of the people who got it, while MERS was even deadlier, killing 34% of patients. Fatal cases for COVID-19 are lower at 3.4%.

Symptoms for the novel coronavirus can be either mild or severe, and can include fever, a cough and shortness of breath. It is also possible to be infected without showing symptoms, according to the WHO.

Before last week, the Philippines had not reported any new cases for almost a month, leading the WHO to commend the country for the way it had handled the contagion.

That seems to be changing now, especially after criticisms of slow public announcements about new cases, and after senators found out about the dearth in testing kits.

On March 9, senators criticized health officials for failing to buy enough testing kits for suspected carriers of COVID-19.

The agency only has 2,000 kits and expects to receive 4,500 more from the WHO, Alethea de Guzman, a DoH medical specialist, told a Senate hearing this week.

An imported COVID-19 test kit costs about P6,000.

The department is reviewing a decision it made earlier to limit the use of test kits to travelers from countries with cases of COVID-19, she said.

“I’m a bit concerned because it’s important for us to be able to test as many people as possible, but we only have this limited number of test kits,” Senator Maria Lourdes Nancy S. Binay told *BusinessWorld*.

Senator Imee R. Marcos said she and her fellow lawmakers “felt a bit nervous” when they learned about the number of test kits available.

“You have a population of 110 million, and you can only test 2,000 people?” she said in an interview.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has since approved COVID-2019 test kits developed by scientists from the University of the Philippines-National Institutes of Health (NIH) to help speed up the diagnosis.

“At least there are now locally made testing kits,” Ms. Binay said. “I hope DoH would be more proactive in addressing the problem moving forward.”

Health Secretary Francisco T. Duque III earlier noted that testing 100 million people was impractical.

### **ALGORITHM**

Rabindra R. Abeyasinghe, WHO representative in the Philippines, has ruled out expanding testing capacity now given a global shortage in testing materials.

“So many countries are doing testing based on the capacity of their laboratory systems and expertise levels,” he told a House of Representatives hearing on March 11.

Mr. Abeyasinghe said there’s an effort on the part of the government to expand capacity, but protocols must be

followed to conserve precious resources. “Protocols need to be followed so that we do a risk assessment before testing,” he said.

The WHO representative also said the Health department had developed over the years a “clearly defined algorithm” in evaluating cases and containing infections. That expertise has been shared with the Regional Epidemiology and Surveillance Units of its neighbors, he pointed out.

Mr. Duque said the Philippines is beefing up its testing centers by preparing five more laboratories outside the capital aside from the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine in Muntinlupa City and the NIH in Quezon City.

“We have expanded our contact-tracing by increasing the number of deployed surveillance teams to respond to the newer cases,” the Health chief.

He added that there was a proposal to expand the “surveillance scale” for influenza-like illnesses to “increase the index of suspicion.”

The plan would increase the DoH’s surveillance capacity by five times, and it needs a P135-million budget for that, Mr. Duque said.

The agency also needs to level up its management artillery, hospital supplies and equipment, and it’s seeking an additional P2.9-billion budget for the next three months that will be provided by the nation’s charity office and gambling regulator.

The DoH is also asking for a separate P2-billion supplemental budget from both Houses of Congress. The House of Representatives approved a lower budget of P1.6 billion before lawmakers went on an almost two-month Holy Week break on March 12.

The Senate might hold a special session during the break to pass the budget bill, Senator Juan Miguel Zubiri said on March 11.

Norman Dennis E. Marquez, associate director of the Health Sciences Department of the Ateneo de Manila University, said health authorities should aggressively test persons under monitoring, not just persons under investigation.

“Asymptomatic individuals may be carriers and infect others,” Mr. Marquez, who said he does not speak for the university, said in an e-mailed reply to questions. “If we can identify them early as positive for the virus, then we can isolate them as well to prevent spread.”

Laboratory testing should also be made available in private hospitals “so we can get results faster,” Mr. Marquez, a medical doctor, said.

### **FACE MASKS**

Aside from test kits, face masks have been missing in most drug stores due to hoarding since January, and the Department of Trade has asked a local manufacturer to