

DISCUSSANT'S NOTES

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PIDS studies/presentations commented on:

- 1. Primary Health Care for Noncommunicable Diseases in the Philippines**
(Valerie Gilbert T. Ulep, Jhanna Uy and Lyle Daryll Casas)
- 2. An Assessment of the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) in the Philippines: Challenges and Ways Forward** (Valerie Gilbert T. Ulep, Jhanna Uy)

With the country's goal of progressively realizing Universal Health Coverage, the two studies presented give valuable insights on what we could improve as policy makers, and program implementors. I would like to start the discussion by recognizing the major contributions of these research works. The study on EPI highlighted the supply side system issues in implementing the program that resulted to vaccine stockouts, contrary to what we often perceived that low vaccination confidence or the demand side issues lead to low vaccination coverage. On the other hand, the study on NCD program gave emphasis on the need to re-organized Primary Health Care to provide integrated NCD services. As envisioned in the law, access to the particular services in these programs should be made available to all Filipinos, prioritizing those belonging to the poorest households and the disadvantaged populations.

In terms of the strengths of the research studies, both studies were able to identify the challenges in the implementation of Non-communicable Diseases Program and Expanded Immunization Program, respectively. These implementation bottlenecks give strong evidence on the need to change the way we are doing things in the program management cycle. Given these vertical programs, the studies also provided us a picture of what the situation is in the country through up-to-date statistics and sound projections. Lastly, the studies also gave us concrete recommendations on what we could do to improve the processes for each program. This particularly applies to the study "An Assessment of the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) in the Philippines: Challenges and Ways Forward" where short term and medium to long term solutions were provided.

From the viewpoint of the researchers, the objective of their studies is to inform policy and improve the program implementation. Hence, the results of the studies are directed to policy makers and implementors in both the DOH and PhilHealth. In terms of recommendations specific to the Corporation, we want to also share with you what we are doing and where we stand when it comes to these issues. We would like to **reiterate that the Corporation is working towards implementing the health reforms envisioned in the Universal Health Care Act of the Philippines or R.A. 11223** which also serves as bases for some recommendations given by the researchers of the studies.

First, with the study on "Primary Health Care for Noncommunicable Diseases in the Philippines", we agree with the findings of the study that there is a need to strengthen the NCD management in the country which calls for a stronger primary care system. The cases of noncommunicable diseases will increase in the medium to long term. With this, the country needs to prepare itself to respond to the increased need for health care. Currently,

the Corporation has begun implementing the PhilHealth Konsulta Package that integrated the previous primary care benefits of the Corporation namely, Primary Care Benefit (PCB) and the Expanded PCB. The primary goal of the package is to increase access to primary care and ensure financial protection to all Filipinos. The study mentioned the PCB's limited population coverage, but with PhilHealth Konsulta, we are targeting to have each and every Filipino to be registered with their chosen PhilHealth Konsulta Provider, pursuant to the UHC law..

The PhilHealth Konsulta Package includes primary care consultation, targeted health risk screening and assessment, access to 13 laboratory and diagnostic services and provision of 21 medicines. The services included address 80% of the most common outpatient consultations, specifically hypertension, diabetes, hypercholesterolemia, Ischemic Heart Disease, urinary tract infection (UTI), upper respiratory tract infection (URTI), low risk pneumonia, acute gastroenteritis (AGE),.

The payment mechanism of the package is blended, combining capitation with performance-based payment. This performance-based payment will include patient management targets where payments are divided into tranches according to the provider's compliance and performance.

On the other hand, the evaluation of the Expanded Immunization Program gave a more practical view on the matter and has provided us with short term and medium to long term solutions to the issues they have identified. As the study mentioned, the occasional breakouts that happen in the country suggest that there is "under-vaccination, untimely administration, and failure to meet and maintain the herd immunity level", signaling the need to improve the management and tackle the issues of the immunization program. With the recommendation to shift financing from the DOH to PhilHealth, the Corporation shall follow the guidelines set by the DOH. Currently, the DOH is finalizing the transitioning plan for commodities, defining individual and population based services, and is in touch with the Corporation's representatives regarding the matter. Factors such as externality, economies of scale, and availability in the market are being considered. This will also be affected by the Mandanas Ruling of the Supreme Court which calls for the national government agency to devolve services to the Local Government Units corresponding to the increase in their internal revenue allotment.

In the coming years, hopefully by year 2024, the Corporation aims to transition Konsulta to the Comprehensive Outpatient Benefit Package mentioned in the law. The health services will be expanded to cover different health conditions and needs among Filipinos, the local government plays a key role as we shift towards a COPB since the law sees its implementation in the context of healthcare provider networks, the intent of which is to ensure provision of a full spectrum of care from primary to tertiary. And their response to integrate their local healthcare system will also define our intended health outcomes. Currently, other research studies are being conducted by our academe partners that will feed on to the policy for COPB (Dr. Dans). We value the support of research institutions such as the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, and will keep your inputs and recommendations to mind when we are drafting the policies particularly in determining the basket of services to be included in the package. Including the PhilHealth Konsulta Package

and later on the Comprehensive Outpatient Benefit Package in the National Health Insurance Program may pave the way for the country to contain cost, prevent crowding out in private facilities, and improve the overall systems efficiency.

In terms of the reforms mandated by the Universal Health Care Act that will impact not only the implementation of these two programs but other aspects of the health system, various policies from the DOH have already been issued. All of these policies serve as our reference in the Corporation in the actual development of policies while ensuring harmonization of our work with that of the Department of Health. Challenges remain on how we could implement these reforms but both agencies are working towards its full implementation in accordance to the law.

We appreciate all the valuable information and inputs that the two studies have provided in ensuring the provision of quality health services to all Filipinos. As the national health insurer, we shall continue to provide health insurance coverage and ensure affordable, acceptable, available and accessible health care services for all citizens of the Philippines, true to the mandate of the Corporation, especially in this time of great need.

Key takeaway messages:

1. The Corporation is working towards implementing the health reforms envisioned in the Universal Health Care Act of the Philippines or R.A. 11223.
2. The Corporation has begun implementing the PhilHealth Konsulta Package that integrated the previous primary care benefits of the Corporation namely, Primary Care Benefit (PCB) and the Expanded PCB, the primary goal of which is to increase access to primary care and to have each and every Filipino to be registered with their chosen PhilHealth Konsulta Provider, pursuant to the UHC law.
3. Challenges remain on how we could implement UHC reforms but both the DOH and PhilHealth are working towards its full implementation in accordance to the law. And that in policy development, the DOH shall take the lead and their policy issuances will serve as the Corporation's reference.