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DoH allots P10M to purchase opioids for poor cancer patients

By Cesar Mangawang
Philippine Daily Inquirer

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MANILA, Philippines—Health Secretary Francisco Duque announced the availability of P10 million for the purchase of opioids (such as morphine) to alleviate the pain of poor patients suffering from cancer all over the country.

Duque made the announcement during the “Workshop on Assuring Availability and Accessibility of Opioids Analgesics for Pain and Palliative” held last month at the Boracay Regency Hotel in Boracay Island, Aklan.

He said “the Department of Health is grateful for every opportunity to review the country’s progress in our pain control efforts, to confront the ever-present challenges that come our way, and to embark on a renewed, collective effort with our partners as we map out our national strategies on pain control as well as our part in the global pain control efforts.”

According to him, the relief and management of cancer pain in the Philippines is benchmarked on the World Health Organization’s Three-step Ladder of Cancer Pain Management. The medical profession, he said before delegates from Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, has long recognized the unnecessary pain suffered by many patients but pain control has been a low priority issue in health care.

Necessary for pain relief

Duque said international policies and cancer pain guidelines also recognized that opioids are necessary for the relief of pain, and that national and local governments must ensure that these pain relief drugs are adequately available to meet the requirements.

Since cancer affects at least 200,000 Filipinos daily, he said the DoH has made pain control a part of its mission, laying the foundation for a prominent role in national pain control collaborations and partnerships.

According to him, the DoH has initiated three phases for the national program on cancer pain control.

- It targeted different stakeholders which resulted in top-line meetings and partnerships with various groups.
- Cancer pain control capability building workshops were conducted at the DoH regional level.
- A consultative workshop addressed the multisectoral concerns on morphine inaccessibility and other pain relief misconceptions.

Minimal use of morphine

Duque said morphine use in the Philippines was deemed minimal at only 0.14 kilogram per million population or a daily dose of only seven milligrams per day, as reported by the International Narcotic Control Board in 2004. He said that although there is no shortage of the need for morphine use, “we lagged behind advanced countries and even from our Southeast Asian neighbors such as Thailand (12 mg per day), Singapore (31 mg per day) and

Malaysia (18 mg per day).

Duque attributed such minimal showing to various factors like multisectoral barriers posed by physicians, patients and suppliers combined. He cited the underlying issues as morphine inaccessibility due to opioids regulatory issue, existence of morphine misconceptions at different levels, coordination issues between the stakeholders at the service level, etc.

The health secretary also enumerated the following reasons:

- Many physicians remain uncomfortable with the use of opioids apparently due to fear of drug addiction and other side effects.
- There is also a perception that these drugs are to be used as “last resort” only and some of our doctors prefer weaker drugs.
- A good number of physicians are barred by technicalities such as incomplete prescription details and lack of authorized licenses to prescribe the drugs.
- Majority of physicians, who believe these pain relief drug are effective, do not have the required S2 licenses and yellow prescriptions.
- Patients have their share of misgivings about pain drugs for fear of addiction and side effects as well as propelled by our tolerance of pain.
- Availability of morphine is a significant problem, which is related to low demand and limitation of the so-called yellow prescriptions.
- Pharmacies and drug stores have perceived dispensing of drugs as a tedious requirement leading to inconsistent filling and refilling of prescriptions.

Filipino pain advocates

Duque said the emergence and fast-growing eminence of Filipino pain advocates such as the Pain Society of the Philippines and other working at the forefront of pain is a welcome.

“In the last few years we have seen the steady growth, not only in the ranks of pain advocates but more important, on the impact that they bring to the lives and consciousness of Filipinos in terms of pain control and management,” he said.

<http://showbizandstyle.inquirer.net/lifestyle/lifestyle/view/20080614-142571/NGOs-help-cancer-sufferers-ease-their-pain>

NGOs help cancer sufferers ease their pain

By Cesar Mangawang
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(Second of a series)

MANILA, Philippines—Dr. Henry Lu, president of the Pain Society of the Philippines, had encounters with people suffering from cancer.

For instance, his sister who had end stage colon cancer was only given 20 tablets of 10 mg morphine and was told that it's good for three months.

Dr. Lu has a patient with end stage lung cancer in Butuan City who needs morphine. The hospital pharmacy can only give them 3 remaining ampules of morphine.

A patient in Legazpi City can't find any Fentanyl ampule in the whole region.

A mother of a 3-year-old patient with end stage cancer had difficulty looking for doctors to prescribe morphine to her son who had bad abdominal pain.

Intended beneficiaries

These people and those who have difficulty in obtaining opioids to ease their pain would have benefited from the workshop on "Assuring Availability and Accessibility of Opioid Analgesics for Pain and Palliative Care" held at the Boracay Regency Beach Resort and Convention Center if it were held earlier.

The delegates from the Philippines come from government agencies and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) that are involved in pain free advocacy.

NGOs

Among these NGOs are the Pain Society of the Philippines and Hospice Philippines.

The Society of the Philippines is co-terminus with the mother organization, the International Association for the Study of Pain. It was organized for educational, scientific and charitable purposes.

Hospice Philippines has over 50 hospice and palliative care organizations nationwide. Among them are SMILES of Davao, FACES of Bacolod, Cancer Care Network of Cebu and PALCARE based in PGH.

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<http://showbizandstyle.inquirer.net/lifestyle/lifestyle/view/20080815-154942/Making-opioids-accessible-and-available>

Making opioids accessible and available

By Cesar Mangawang
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Third in a series

MANILA, Philippines—In the Philippines, many patients suffering from cancer and other serious illnesses have long been deprived of adequate pain relief they need. Concerned doctors and patients have apprehensions about addiction and dependency from opioids like morphine. Because of this, there is subdued and low usage of opioids for pain relief.

Most doctors in the country still hesitate to prescribe for patients writhing in pain. The prohibitive costs of opioids and heavy restrictions in its procurement and prescription further aggravate the availability and accessibility of these controlled medicines.

Yet there is no denying the essential role of pain management and palliative care in ensuring the highest attainable standards of health and quality of life of patients suffering from terminal illnesses like cancer.

During the “Workshop on Assuring Accessibility and Availability of Opioid Analgesic for Pain and Palliative Care,” various sectors in government and nongovernment tackled issues that beset opioid usage and identified possible course of actions and solutions for them.

The workshop was co-organized by the American International Health Alliance Twinning Center, Open Society Institute (OSI), International Palliative Care Initiative, National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (USA), Pain and Policy Studies Group (PPSG), World Health Organization Collaborating Center for Policy and Communications in Cancer Care, University of Wisconsin, and Pain Society of the Philippines (PSP).

Country teams

The Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand are the three Southeast Asian countries that participated in the workshop. Comprising each country team were different members involved at different aspects of opioid usage, including regulation, distribution, enforcement, prescription and dispensing, retail and end-use.

The Philippine country team for the workshop was composed of representatives from government regulatory bodies Department of Health (DOH), Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) and Philhealth. Major NGOs and professional groups involved in pain management such as PSP, Hospice Philippines and several pain centers (St. Luke’s Medical Center, Manila Doctors Hospital, etc.) as well as private companies (Mercury Drugstore) in the country also took part in the workshop.

Dr. Antonio Villalon, one of the country’s eminent medical oncologists and a proponent of the “Philippine Cancer Control Program,” said pain management is an important component of the national cancer control agenda for improving the quality of life of cancer patients.

The program led by the DOH, Philippine Cancer Society and other related groups started in 1986 and has adapted

the WHO analgesic ladder of pain management and relief.

However, 20 years after the introduction of the WHO analgesic ladder to the Philippines, the barriers to opioid prescribing still persist, said Dr. Francis Javier, director of St. Luke's Pain Management Center. He attributed this to the different factors caused by physicians, patients, families and the constraints imposed by government regulatory bodies.

Also contributing to the sluggish state of opioid analgesics usage for pain and palliative care in the country were problems in distribution and decreasing government subsidy for opioid medication over the past years.

The steady increase—from less than 15 kilograms in 1999 to 20.7 kg in 2005—in the country's morphine consumption has not affected its standing in opioid usage. The Philippines is still lagging behind developed countries and even other neighboring Southeast Asian nations.

Expected to get a boost

It was during the workshop that Health Secretary Francisco T. Duque III announced the government's commitment of P10 million for morphine procurement, to benefit mainly the poor Filipino patients suffering needlessly from pain. Because of this, the country's relative shortfall in morphine use is soon expected to get a boost.

According to PSP President Dr. Henry Lu, the renewed government support for morphine and other opioid analgesics for pain relief is a huge stride for the advocacy in pain management and palliative care, especially since it was complemented by a reinforced multisectoral commitment for greater opioid accessibility and availability.

The workshop also led to a renewed collaboration between doctors and other healthcare professionals, private sector and government agencies.

Technical working group

The organizations to which doctors and other healthcare professionals belong now comprise the technical working group whose main objective is to develop and implement policies and activities to improve opioid accessibility and availability for pain and palliative care in the country.

The technical working group is led by Doctors Lu and Ivanhoe Escartin (Department of Health) as overall chairpersons. The different committees of the group include the regulations committee chaired by Dr. Antonio H. Villalon (Philippine Cancer Society) and co-chaired by Undersecretary Romeo Vera-Cruz (DDB) with Erwin Espinosa (Mundipharma), Arlene G. Ramos (Zuellig), Corazon Cruz and Eden Fernandez (Mercury Drug), Marlyn del Rosario (Johnson & Johnson) and Dr. Frank Diza (DOH) as members.

The finance committee, chaired by Shirley Domingo (Philhealth) and co-chaired by Dr. Rachel Rosario (Hospice Philippines), has its members Dr. Ben Reyes (DOH), Lilian Hizon and Dr. Ernie Vera (DOH).

Education and information, promotion and compliance committee is chaired by Helen Reyes and co-chaired by Dr. Lorina Cabaluna with Undersecretary Edgar Galvante (DDB), Commodore Romeo Sanga (PDEA), Assistant Secretary Rodolfo N. Caisip, (DDGO), Assistant Secretary Baltazar Balangauan (DDGA), Drug Association of the Philippines, Hospital Pharmacists Association of the Philippines as members.

The secretariat committee is composed of Sylvia C. Palma (ACES) and Agnes Mandap (PDEA).

Advocacy management group Advocacies Convergence & Events Strategists (ACES) organized the workshop and is coordinating the succeeding collaborative activities of the technical working group.