

■ By V.A.A. Cicky Buenaventura

RAIN OR SHINE, the health sector is always in a state of gloom. The Philippine government fails to provide solid and long-term solutions to its plentiful woes. As heavily as the rains poured during the months of July to September, so did the three of the health sector's perennial afflictions aggravate. Prominent in the news during this period were the uncontrollable rise of dengue cases, a frightening forecast of a looming collapse of the country's health care system due to the unabated migration of our health professionals, and the impending cut in the Department of Health's share in the proposed national budget for 2006.

As the rainy season progressed during the third quarter, dengue once again became a frightening buzzword in the health scene. The number of people afflicted and killed by the disease rose significantly

despite a nationwide alert declared by the DoH in August. As of September 11, the deadly disease has afflicted a total of 18,802 persons – 26



percent more than the number of reported cases during the same period last year—and the death toll has reached an alarming 280 since January 1. The DoH projects that this

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year's cases could reach 20,000 by the time the rainy season ends in October.

Also during this period, the brain drain experienced by the country officially became a "national hemorrhage." The Health Alliance for Democracy (HEAD) reported that 80 percent of government doctors

RAINS & DOOM

A health digest for the 3rd Quarter 2005



WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE....teen-age boys wade through waist-deep flood waters to get to a source of safe drinking water. A perennial problem all over the Philippines when the rains come, floods bring with them a host of diseases.



THE YOUNG AND THE OLD are the most vulnerable in a country whose government ignores basic health services.

are confirmed currently enrolled in nursing schools, hoping to join the 5,000 who have already left the country in 2004 to work as nurses abroad. This continued mass flight of our health specialists has led the Alliance of Health Workers (AHW) to predict a collapse of the country's health care system within the next two to three years. The AHW pointed out that poor working conditions and lack of opportunities locally have driven Filipino nurses and specialists to seek better-paying jobs, mostly as nurses, in hospitals particularly in the Middle East and North America. As a result of this unabated migration, nine hospitals in the province of Isabela have closed, with two more in Aklan following suit, as hospitals fail to sustain operations due to understaffing. The term "outsourcing," a popular term in the call center industry, has now even become part of the health sector's jargon - referring to district hospitals' hiring of private health practitioners in a desperate attempt to evade closure.

As if adding insult to the already injured health sector, a cut in the DoH's share in the national budget for 2006 is in the offing. The government has earmarked P9.95 B for the DoH

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for next year. The current budget is P10.3 B. This means that the agency's share in the proposed national budget of P1.05 trillion is a measly 0.947 percent. With the pending decline yet again in the DoH's allocation, Sen. Manuel Villar pointed out that the allotted P9.95 for DoH would be insufficient to finance all of the agency's projects and programs especially in the light of some expensive campaigns that the agency is scheduled to undertake in the coming year. Among the major undertakings targeted by the DoH for next year is the 'Murang Gamot'

project, with a proposed P10.6 B allocation, and the maintenance of the 'Botika sa Barangay' in 5,000 barangays all over the country. The agency has likewise allocated P2.9 billion as health premium subsidy for the poor. But with the many problems besetting the sector that requires, among others, enormous sums of money, the big question of whether the pending allocation will suffice to achieve this lacks a definite answer.

The health sector continues to be one of the social services suffering the blow as the government prioritizes debt servicing. At least P344.4 B (a full third) of next year's budget is already reserved for debt servicing (payment of interest and principal). While the 2006 budget increased by P134.6 B, the increases will go to public works (which will get a boost of P33.3 B next year, from its current P64.5 B) and the military (which receives P8.33 B more in 2006, from its already sizeable 2005 budget of P44.07 B). Needless to say, with the looming cut in DoH budget for 2006, what can only be expected is a further decline in the quality and accessibility of health care and the worsening of the agency's age-old problems.

With the new cut in the DoH

budget, it is a wonder how the government can possibly alter the already bleak and dismal picture of the country's health sector. With insufficient allocation for massive information drives and fumigation, among other necessary interventions to combat the outbreak, it will not be surprising if dengue figures should only continue to rise during the next rainy season.

Similarly, with no clear prospects for progress to offer our already demoralized health workers who are overworked and underpaid amid the spiraling of prices of almost all commodities, the AHW prediction may indeed just happen. The United States alone will be requiring around a million nurses more within the next 15 years. As the Philippine government remains inutile in effecting changes to better compensate our health professionals, the number of migrant Filipino health workers leaving the country is expected to multiply drastically, leaving our health care in undeniable sorry state and peril.

In light of these, one cannot help but wonder what could possibly be more frightening: the next rainy season or the imminent crumbling of our health system.

At this point, the thought of reviving the glory days of the *timpladas*, *albalyayos* and *hilots* truly seems comforting.

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