

The COVID-19 Response in the Philippines

Maria Minerva P. Calimag, M.D., M.Sc., Ph.D.

President, The Philippine Medical Association

The demography of the Philippines

The Philippines is an archipelago with cities spread across the country's approximate 7,641 islands. These islands are divided into three geographical divisions --Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. There are a total of 82 provinces in the country and 1,493 municipalities, with a total of 145 chartered cities headed by mayors, and 42,029 barangays (villages) headed by barangay captains.

The devolved healthcare system in the Philippines

The Philippine Congress enacted the Local Government Code of 1991 (Republic Act No. 7160) which was signed into law on October 10, 1991, and took effect on January 1, 1992, in response to the Constitutional directive of the 1987 Philippine Constitution mandated the Congress to “enact a local government code which shall provide for a more responsive and accountable local government structure instituted through a system of decentralization with effective mechanisms of recall, initiative, and referendum, allocate among the different local government units their powers, responsibilities, and resources, and provide for the qualifications, election, appointment and removal, term, salaries, powers and functions and duties of local officials, and all other matters relating to the organization and operation of the local units (Section 3, Article X).”

The enactment of the Code mandated the devolution in the delivery of healthcare services of many centralized functions previously discharged by the national Department of Health (DOH) to locally elected provincial, city, and municipal governments. From a highly centralized health service delivery system with the DOH as the sole provider, the decentralization of health services reallocated the decision-making capability and resources to LGUs to improve efficiency and effectiveness in delivering health services (Cuenca, 2018).

The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines

The outbreak of the newly described coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), has affected millions of people globally and led to over 1.9 million deaths worldwide by the beginning of January 2021 almost a year after the World Health Organization declared it as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020.

In the **Philippines**, from **03 January 2020 to 6:58pm CEST, 07 September 2022**, there have been **3,894,840 confirmed cases** of COVID-19 with **62,118 deaths**, reported to WHO. Strict measures including lockdowns such as Enhanced Community Quarantines have been implemented since March 2020 in an effort to halt the spread of the virus. Several local governments have opted for lockdown with strict border controls as one of the measures to combat the rapidly increasing number of COVID-19 cases. Minimum health standards such as physical distancing, masking and handwashing complement the vaccination efforts.

Indeed, Covid-19 has upended societies and dramatically altered everyday life across the globe. Our present circumstances, while unprecedented, have been profoundly shaped by persistent societal realities—such as entrenched racial and economic inequality, the proliferation of

misinformation and infobesity, and anxieties about the ability of the world's economies particularly the LMICs, to confront major crises. In-depth social understanding will be vital to halting the crisis and charting the path to move forward.

The ONE HOSPITAL COMMAND CENTER

The Philippine government officially launched the One Hospital Command Center (OHCC) on 06 August 2020, with the Department of Health (DOH) and the Inter-agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), in coordination with the Department of Interior Local Government (DILG), the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA), the Department of Tourism (DOT), and the Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA). The aim was to implement faster, and more efficient COVID-19 case referrals thus strengthening the healthcare system and preventing it from being overwhelmed. The OHCC underscores the national government's whole-of-government, whole-of-system, and whole-of-nation approach against COVID-19.

The Command Center housed the One Hospital Command which facilitated a comprehensive and coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic by ensuring effective and efficient health facility referral in Metro Manila through the provision of critical services such as 24/7 coordination of our various health facilities, data analytics, communication, transportation, and other unified network mechanisms and interventions. It ultimately reduced the waiting time of patients by referring them to the appropriate health facility that could best provide for the level of care they require.

The OHCC facilitated medical transport and patient pick-up arrangements, provided health system capacity data analytics and risk communications, and optimized the use of critical care services of every hospital in the area.

The Center could be accessed by using the Pure Force Citizens application downloaded for free in Google Play store and App Store, by scanning the Quick Response (QR) codes, or by calling their dedicated landlines.

The large volume of calls and referrals to the OHCC were managed by an off-site call-taking and dispatch company that enabled OHCC staff to focus on directing and coordinating COVID-19 case referrals.

All details gathered during the call were uploaded to a dispatch system that automatically prompted OHCC coordinators from various agencies that a new case needs to be handled. Using the DOH dashboards and protocols, the coordinators identified the proper health facility where the case will be referred. Once identified, the coordinator then called the receiving facility, updated the dispatch system, and provided feedback to the referring facility or patient.

For emergency cases, the call taker, together with the OHCC coordinators simultaneously coordinated with the receiving facility and provided pre-arrival instructions.

The RESBAKUNA and PINASLAKAS Vaccination Programs

Globally 12.7B doses were administered, 4.94B were fully vaccinated, and 63.3% of the target population was vaccinated.

The **Philippine Medical Association** with its 119 Component Societies, 8 Specialty Divisions, 75 Specialty and Subspecialty Societies, and 45 Affiliate Societies assisted the local governments at rural, municipal and provincial levels and the Department of Health in the implementation of the **RESBAKUNA Program**. As of **30 May 2022**, a total of **150,536,673 vaccine doses have been administered**. Individuals with at least one dose were 73,943,370 (82.15% of target population), while 69,331,996 (77.03% of target population) were fully vaccinated.

Last July 26, 2022, the **PINASLAKAS Program** was launched to enhance uptake of the booster doses. As of **12 September 2022**, a total of **168,067,505 vaccine doses have been administered**. **72.6M were fully vaccinated representing 66.2% of target population**.

The **Bakunahang Bayan** or simultaneous national mass booster campaign is slated on September 26-30, 2022.

BANTAI COVID AI-enabled COVID-19 Tracker

In a bid to contain the local transmission of Covid-19 and ease the burden of contact tracing, **the Quezon City local government tapped artificial intelligence (AI) to automate the tracking and monitoring of suspected and probable cases**. On **26 July 2020**, Sunday, Quezon City, the biggest city in the Philippines launched the **BANTAI COVID project which aims to remotely reach and monitor those who have been exposed to Covid-19 positive individuals in a real-time manner and via short message service (SMS)**.

The AI-based project helped build a centralized database repository for patients' information and data that is accessible to health workers at any time. The system provided a daily census of patients' real-time status including the date of their admission, discharge, and recovery, among others, thereby providing big data for monitoring and evaluation. Using telemedicine, the project augmented and improved healthcare services by bridging patients with available health experts virtually thus enabling health workers, including volunteer doctors, to efficiently pull out a record, conduct triage, and refer the patient to any hospital or quarantine facility as needed.

Following the surge of active COVID-19 cases, probably linked to the highly transmissible Omicron variant, the Quezon City local government has issued Memorandum No. 04-22, an updated set of guidelines for the management of cases placed on home isolation and quarantine by City health authorities.

Under the **Guidelines for Community Case Management for COVID-19 Program**, the city government laid down the home isolation rules for all suspect, probable, and confirmed COVID-19 cases, who are asymptomatic or manifest mild symptoms such as sore throat, fever, cough, and colds. Home quarantine is required for all close contacts who are exposed to suspect, probable, and confirmed COVID-19 cases, and are asymptomatic or with mild symptoms. On the other hand, individuals who are suspect, probable, or confirmed COVID-19 cases belonging to vulnerable groups such as the elderly and with comorbidities, pregnant, children, and the unvaccinated, or those who had moderate or severe symptoms, were prioritized, and transferred to city-owned hospitals or HOPE Community Care Facilities.

BANTAI COVID was made possible through close collaboration with the Philippine Medical Association, private enterprise VIREO Loadworks Inc., and the Quezon City Medical Society.

The Health Technology Assessment Council

The Health Technology Assessment Council (HTAC) was created by virtue of Section 34 of RA 11223 or the Universal Health Care Law. The HTA aims **to support the process of evidence-based decision-making in health care at the policy level by providing reliable information.** In this respect, HTA bridges the world of research and the world of decision-making in healthcare.

In response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Health Technology Assessment Council (HTAC) is supported by the Health Technology Assessment Unit (HTAU). It remains committed to supporting the Department of Health (DOH) as it continues to lead the Inter-Agency Task Force for COVID-19 (IATF)

The HTAC recognizes the need for a strong health emergency response to rapidly evolving situations that require immediate and effective response efforts across various sectors. Decision-makers and experts from various fields working together ensure clear, responsive, and actionable scientific recommendations that could fortify the government's response per the additional HTAC mandates as stipulated in the recently passed Republic Act No. 11469, otherwise known as “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act.”

HTAC values the importance of collaboration and consultation in developing its various recommendations and guidance documents for COVID-19 to ensure that they respond to the decision needs of policymakers and frontliners who make use of the different health technologies in managing patients and containing outbreaks.

HTAC recognizes the and as well as the deployment of innovative tools, health technologies, and interventions concerned with the detection, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of COVID-19.

To provide evidence-based guidance to decision-makers in responding to the pandemic, the HTAU has conducted rapid reviews to support the recommendations of HTAC on various COVID-19 health technologies: 1. Investigational drugs; 2. SARS-CoV-2 real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR)-based test kits; 3. Lateral flow kits: a. Rapid antibody-based test (RAT) kits; 4. Huawei Cloud Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted diagnosis; 5. AMTI uAI-Discover-PNA; and 6. High-flow nasal cannula and Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO)

HTAC has been working closely with infectious disease experts from the Philippine Society for Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (PSMID) since the pandemic began to ensure alignment in scientific guidelines. More recently, the HTAC has also started discussions with experts from the DOH Technical Advisory Group (TAG) for COVID-19 and the Health Professionals Alliance Against COVID-19 (HPAAC) in developing screening and management strategies for at-risk populations. Recommendations made from the appraisals will primarily serve as guidance in developing a public health policy most responsive to the health care needs of special populations, as well as for the management of public health emergencies.

As knowledge of COVID-19 continues to widen, the need for public health decisions grounded on scientific evidence becomes increasingly crucial. Therefore, the key role of HTA is to support national research efforts and inform decision-making to ensure that patients have access to the best tools and health technologies.

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RESBAKUNA Turns One, Over 63 Million Filipinos Fully Vaccinated Against Covid-19 <https://doh.gov.ph/press-release/resbakuna-turns-one-over-63-million-filipinos-fully-vaccinated-against-covid-19>

DOH Launches “PINASLAKAS” – The Nationwide Booster Vaccine Campaign https://doh.gov.ph/press-release/DOH_launches%20pinaslakas_the%20nationwide_booster_vaccine_campaign

QC taps artificial intelligence for monitoring of Covid-19 cases <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1110366>

Health Technology Assessment Council (HTAC) <https://hta.doh.gov.ph/health-technology-assessment-council-htac/>