

DEGENERATIVE AND OTHER NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

The remarkable gain in life expectancy, which has become longer for Filipinos, the decline in infant mortality and the breakthroughs in the fight against communicable diseases have shifted drastically the pattern of disabling and fatal diseases. The latter part of the 20th century has shown a steady rise in the prevalence of degenerative and other non-communicable diseases. Public expenditure for these diseases is increasing and greatly straining our health service delivery system. Effective strategies to address degenerative diseases must be put in place in order to reduce the morbidity, mortality and disability associated with them. The wealth of medical research reveals that much can be achieved in the fight against degenerative diseases through preventive strategies including personal discipline and education aimed at their early detection and treatment. Appropriate measures to prevent the onset of lifestyle-related diseases should be taken before the illness begins. Lifestyle that favors indulgence and excess and dangerous consumer products that increase the risk to some forms of illness should be totally discouraged.

Chronic and serious illnesses such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes mellitus among others, are the results of heredity and the combined harm related to cigarette smoking, emotional stress, diet and environmental and behavioral influences capable of provoking ill health. The early diagnosis and prompt management of these diseases are the major control measures and protection against their debilitating effects or death.

Although infectious diseases remain as the major causes of morbidity, degenerative diseases have emerged as the major causes of mortality in the country today. Cardiovascular diseases (CVD) including hypertension and stroke have become the number one causes of death and account for more than 25 percent of all deaths in the Philippines. Other leading causes of deaths among the degenerative diseases are malignant neoplasms, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases and diabetes mellitus.

One-third of all cancer is curable if detected early and treated properly. The top cancer sites in the Philippines include those whose major causes are known and therefore action can be taken for primary prevention. Cancer of the lungs can be prevented with more vigorous and sustained campaign against cigarette smoking;

liver cancer can be prevented by hepatitis B vaccination; Pap smear test and safe sex could prevent cervical cancer; while healthy diet prevents colorectal cancer.

The prevalence of asthma is increasing, especially among children. Most asthma patients report family history of the disease. Asthma may also result from sensitivity to allergens and may occur due to adverse environmental conditions such as air pollution and other irritants. There are close to 8 million Filipinos with asthma and its burden in terms of health costs is significant. The disease requires a public health approach that stresses prevention and education of patients and their families on reducing exposure to environmental allergens and irritants. Eliminating the barriers to health care will also greatly reduce morbidity and mortality.

Mental disorders are generally considered as inherited, however, severe emotional stress, frustrations and relentless pressure to achieve could trigger mental ill health and other serious illness as well.

Scientific evidence has proven that dietary habits and certain foods are linked with health problems as diverse as heart disease, diabetes mellitus, obesity and certain types of cancer on one end, and health problems like protein energy malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies on the other end. The dietary pattern of most Filipinos has remained nutritionally inadequate both in quantity and quality to provide adequate levels of essential nutrients. It is necessary that appropriate public health measures like healthy diet advocacy and food fortification are intensified to protect and promote the health of people.

Risk factors associated with degenerative and other non-communicable diseases must be given attention. The promotion of healthy lifestyles, healthy diet and physical exercise among others could effectively prevent their onset. Instituting measures for their early detection and prompt management could prevent complications, disabilities or even death.