

THE SAN FERNANDO, LA UNION EXPERIENCE DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19

By: Mary Jane C. Ortega

In February, 2020, I was invited by Dr. Eduardo Badua III, the Director of our Government Hospital, Ilocos Training and Regional Medical Center (ITRMC), to be a member of the Multi-sectoral Governance Council and was informed that we would meet formally in April.

On March 12, 2020, the National Government declared Home Quarantine for Northern Luzon and so, even without being formally organized in the MSGC of ITRMC, I communicated with Dr. Badua III and asked him about the preparedness of our government hospital. I also asked him what the hospital needed to fight Covid-19. San Fernando has the best public hospital in Region I, comprising of four provinces, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Pangasinan and La Union. It also has the best private hospital, Lorma Hospital and another good private hospital, Bethany.

By the third week of March, we were rocked by the news that we had one positive case who was from Abra, a province not belonging to our region, but its citizens have to pass through La Union on its way to and from Manila. The patient, a returning overseas worker, visited his mother who was hospitalized in Lorma Hospital due to arthritis. He went through a thermal scanner and was found to have high fever, was swabbed for testing, and was advised to go on self-quarantine in his home province, Abra. Several days later, he was found positive and was brought to ITRMC for confinement. There were other 9 persons found positive in Pangasinan and they were also brought to ITRMC. Someone from Ilocos Sur was found positive at Bethany Hospital.

While we are proud to have the best hospitals in the area, the downside is that we get patients not from our province alone but from the neighboring ones too. At that time, we did not have a laboratory for testing Covid-19 and had to send the samples to Manila. The country had only had two laboratories, although we had 120,000 testing kits donated by South Korea, Brunei and China. Thus, the results would come back after a week to two weeks later. In the meantime, if the patient does not observe strict self-quarantine, he would have passed on the virus to several others before he gets confined.

The people were advised to follow strictly the home confinement after one week after the proclamation and with the positive case discovered in the area, the people became more safety conscious. There were checkpoints at every boundary of the Local Government and even the Barangays had checkpoints of their own. To ease the plight of those who could not go to market, the City Government under Mayor Alfred Ortega mobilized its resources and gave 10 kilos of rice and 21 pcs of canned goods to all registered households. They discovered there were also individuals who were not registered voters of the city but were caught in the lockdown and they, too, were given assistance. The ones who distributed the packages were the Barangay Captains or the village chiefs.

When the wet market was opened, the crowd gathered and social distancing was not observed. So the city government came out with an ordinance stating that each household will be given a pass to go the wet market every other day. No senior citizen was allowed to go to market. In some barangays, they were encouraged to put up their own small wet market we call "talipapa". On Sundays, the market was

closed for cleaning and disinfecting the surroundings. Only groceries were allowed to open and the malls were closed. Restaurants were allowed to open only for take-outs but not allowed to have diners in their premises. Curfew was imposed and properly observed. When President Duterte extended the time for lockdown until the end of April, Mayor Ortega had to have another set of relief goods prepared but this time, aside from rice, he had dried fish and dried mung beans so that he was able to help the local fishermen and farmers.

To provide for transportation, the city government allowed 190 tricycles to ply the city but when national government imposed strict lockdown even on public transportation, the tricycles were stopped to operate.

The Civil Society was also active to help our community. As the Honorary Chairman of the Philippine Red Cross La Union-Red Cross Chapter which is headed by my son-in-law, Eduardo Regala, we monitored the situation. The staff came up with a chat group and posted the data gathered from the Ilocos Regional Staff (See attachment below). The staff was mobilized and donations were solicited from private individuals for masks, suits, feeding program and other items.

I was President of the Federation of Asia Pacific Association (FAWA) from 2016-2018 and I was so touched when a member of the Issatsu-no-kai in Tokyo asked me what we needed. At that time, we needed thermal scanners because the provincial government's order had not yet arrived. Ms. Akemi Saitoh from Tokyo ordered 48 thermal scanners from California and it was shipped by parcel and I hope to be able to get them soon. We thank Issatsu-no-kai for being the intermediary for the donation of our thermal scanners by a private Japanese firm with a branch in the Philippines.

The Rotary Club and Inner Wheel Club of San Fernando where my husband, Victor and I are members respectively, also did some fundraising for suits and head gears made by our local members but was stopped because we ran out of acetate, a raw material needed for the product. We ordered suits from the local tailor and donated them to the government hospital.

Dr. Jaime Galvez Tan, former Health Secretary of the Philippines and author of "100 Herbal Plants in the Philippines" called me up and shared with me his presentation where he advised the use of virgin coconut oil and the inclusion of the vegetables like KKMSS = Kamote or Sweet Potato leaves, Kolutis, Malunggay or Moringa Oleifera, Leaves of Siling Labuyo or Chili, and Leaves of Saluyut in our diet. These are the common vegetables of the Filipinos, especially in the North, called Ilocandia. For our beverage, he suggested "salabat" or ginger tea with lemon and for those who could take turmeric, take the turmeric tea. Could this have been the cause for the low death rate of 3 from La Union, 1 from Ilocos Norte and 1 from Ilocos Sur and 5 from Pangasinan for a total of 10 deaths for a population of more than 5M? Abra, a province that does not belong to Region 1 also relies on our ITRMC and it has a population of 250,000 and the patient from Abra

Mr. Vijay Jagannathan, Secretary General of CityNet, countered that perhaps another reason for the low death rate is the sunshine that we, in this tropical country, have.

Recently, the team of the WHO approved the setting up of a laboratory here at ITRMC. We hope to have the results of the testing faster and with early detection, proper procedures can be done for the recovery of the patient and the testing of those with whom he has had contact with. ITRMC is preparing

for Plan B because with a laboratory, the number of Covid-19 positive patients may increase with more people being tested. It has a capacity of only 300 beds.

A patient who is brought to the hospital because he is suspected of having Covid-19 is brought to a separate isolation area and he does not have to go to the Emergency Room and contaminate other non-Covid-19 patients. ITRMC has also identified other areas where we may keep patients in isolation and places where to have their medical staff stay so they do not have to compromise their families while they are on duty. Lorma has suggested that we have ITRMC as the Covid-19 hospital and keep Lorma and Bethany for non-Covid-19 patients. For Plan C, ITRMC is considering the unused airport terminal or perhaps a boat that can be docked at the port.

In the meantime, the businesses are suffering. The jobless are dependent on government. Government is dependent on taxes they will collect because during normal times, the last day to pay income taxes would be April 15. But with the lockdown, who can go out and pay their taxes? So, loans from the World Bank and other institutions would have to be availed of. Private businesses have stepped forward and donated funds for the items most needed but with businesses on hold, how long will they be able to keep on giving and still be able to survive?

From the above, we have seen the importance of local governments. While providing basic services and keeping the city clean with continuous garbage collection, they are bombarded by questions as to when they can receive the subsidy from National Government. We also now have to re-think about urban planning and its relation to density of population in cities. Out of the local government units in our province of 20, we have 8 that have been compromised with positive Covid-19 cases. Shouldn't National Government now give some elbow room for those municipalities that have not been compromised to resume business but confined within their boundaries? While it gives a strong message when National Government gives guidelines, shouldn't some areas be decentralized and left to local governments to decide because after all, they have the pulse on the people and the situation on the ground?

Most importantly, our medical practitioners and the other people in the front lines are the ones who are most at risk. How long can they take the stress? Are they properly protected? Do they have ample time to re-energize themselves?

We, senior citizens, can only help from the sidelines. We can think. We can analyze data. We can suggest. We can raise funds. We can network and support one another. But there is that feeling of frustration that one cannot go out and help fight this pandemic. Lastly, we pray and will continue to pray that this Time of Covid-19 would vanish as fast as it has appeared in our world.

However, the big question remains. What is in store for the future of our community, our city, our country, our borderless world affected by Covid-19?

Data as of April 10 for the Philippines – 4,195 cases of Covid-19 positive

140 recoveries (16 of which are new recoveries for the day)

221 deaths (18 of which are new deaths for the day)

Data for the Province of La Union, Philippines as of April 11, 2020

Total confirmed cases – 13

Total deaths --4*

Persons Under Investigation --(PUI) 448

Persons Under Monitoring --(PUM) 19,739

We have several for PUM because these are the Overseas Filipino Workers who came back from Various parts of the world.

- * One person who died is my friend who had been sickly for the past several years plus is a senior citizen.
- I hope to get more data about the three others who died but because of their right of privacy, I have not been able to get them yet.