

WHAT THE FACTS?!



BBM ON HEALTH: NOT ENOUGH RESULTS

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EVEN before the pandemic, Pinoys across the country were already uttering this almost as their daily mantra: *“Sa panahon ngayon, bawal magkasakit.”* It is actually a line from a vitamin supplement commercial, but it rang too true for many Filipinos who could not miss a day at work, which would mean lost wages, and who were also hardpressed in setting aside money for healthcare.

Then came COVID-19, which not only exposed the many existing flaws in our healthcare system, but also in the inability of the previous administration to handle a health crisis. So far, the country has had more than 3.9 million cases of COVID-19, and more than 62,000 deaths related to the disease.

Today researchers say that the daily number of COVID-19 cases is again on the rise, even as the World Health Organization (WHO) says that the pandemic may be nearing its end. Meanwhile, the Philippines now has a new President, which should mean a fresh start.

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	YEAR	CASES		DEATHS		VACCINATION	
		NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%
	2020	472,523	12.0%	9,230	14.7%	---	---
	2021	2,368,495	60.4%	42,143	67.3%	49,626,439	45.2%
	2022	1,082,709	27.6%	11,214	17.9%	23,121,520	21.0%
	TOTAL	3,923,727	100%	62,587	100%	72,747,959	66.2%
RANKING BASED ON MAGNITUDE	World 237 countries & territories	37		21		12	
	West Pacific Region (WPRO) 35 countries & territories	7		1		4	
	ASEAN 10 countries	5		2		3	

Sources: WHO and Our World in Data, September 20, 2022

After previously looking at the platforms of presidential candidates who ran in the May 2022 elections, the Right to Know, Right Now! Coalition decided to monitor the first 100 days of the government of Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr. Time and manpower constraints, however, meant it had to narrow down the sectors to scrutinize. Our team was assigned the health sector, and our findings indicate that President Marcos Jr. has not yet made any significant moves in the sector, including the appointment of a Health Secretary. The latter alone has made some observers criticize the President as allegedly lacking a sense of urgency in addressing the many problems in the health sector.

Our monitoring consisted primarily of looking at the President's signed legal documents and public pronouncements, as well as other government interventions related to health in

his first 100 days. We also looked back at his campaign promises related to the sector, since these would help provide a credible set of expectations regarding the new chief executive's plan when it comes to health.

We narrowed our monitoring some more into relevant policies regarding these specific issues:

- The "missing" Department of Health (DOH) Secretary;
- Pandemic Response;
- Health Institutions;
- Healthcare Workers; and
- Health Financing

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YEAR	POPULATION	INCIDENCE RATE	FATALITY RATE	VACCINATION RATE
2020	109,891,176.74	0.4%	2.0%	---
2021		2.2%	1.8%	45.2%
2022		1.0%	1.0%	21.0%
		3.6%	1.6%	66.2%
		3 to 4 Filipinos in every 100 were infected with COVID-19	1 to 2 died in every 100 infected	66 in every 100 have been fully vaccinated

The "missing" DOH Secretary

As early as May, just days after his electoral victory, Marcos Jr. already began appointing key agency heads. Visibly absent from those initial appointees was the DOH Secretary. On 14 July, the President appointed DOH Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire as the department's Officer-in-Charge. Questions regarding whether or not she or another individual will eventually become Secretary remain.

Dr. Vergeire is an MPH and has a CESO II rank. She is a public health specialist who began working at the Department of Health in 2007 as Health Research Division Chief. In 2015, she was appointed Assistant Secretary for Public Health Services. In 2020, she was appointed Health Undersecretary, in part due to her role in the COVID-19 response as the department's spokesperson.

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Pandemic Response

In his *Tawid-Covid, Beyond Covid* campaign platform, Marcos Jr. emphasized the need to invest in improving the country's medical research facilities, particularly the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) and the UP National Institute of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology. His goal is for the Philippines to develop its own capacity to produce vaccines locally. During his first State of the Nation Address (SONA), he stated his desire to work with Congress toward the construction of a Center for Disease Control and a Vaccine Institute. Yet PhP 115 million was cut from the Epidemiology and Surveillance Program of the DOH in the 2023 National Expenditure Program while PhP 7.92 billion was slashed from the COVID-19 Laboratory Network Commodities budget. The budget for the Prevention and Control of Communicable Diseases also decreased by PhP 4.17 billion.

Marcos Jr. has categorically stated that he will not implement lockdowns. This would mean people would have increased mobility, which in turn needs protocols – and functioning institutions to implement and enforce them – to ensure that



everyone is kept safe from COVID-19 and other viruses.

One of the biggest criticisms against the previous administration's COVID response was the lack of coordination between relevant agencies. The national government would release a nationwide order regarding quarantine rules but implementation in the local level often diverged from such directions. DOH would also brief the public about certain health protocols – only to face memos released by other agencies contrary to its pronouncements. This led to massive confusion among the public and possibly worsened the infection rate in the Philippines.

On 4 July, Malacañang announced that it will be retaining the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), despite calls from lawmakers for an overhaul of the body. Fifteen days later, the Philippine Information Agency reported that the DOH would be reconstituting the member agencies of the IATF to only those with relevant and intended functions. The plan was to streamline processes and use the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council to replace the former National Taskforce Against COVID-19 (NTF). This was in line with Marcos Jr.'s directive to streamline all government offices and processes.

While on the campaign trail, Marcos Jr. said that he would introduce a “job to job” system where vaccine rollout will be prioritized; this is so that businesses can return to full capacity. In his SONA, the President re-emphasized these campaign promises.



On 1 September mask-wearing in outside spaces became optional in Cebu City by way of a local executive order. Vergeire said that DOH was not consulted about the move and asked that local governments follow protocols set by the national government. This was echoed by Interior and Local Governments Secretary BenHur Abalos, but Cebu was not deterred. Abalos said that he would bring the matter up to the IATF. Iloilo and Negros Occidental soon followed Cebu City's lead.

Several days later, on 12 September, Marcos Jr. signed Executive Order No. 3, allowing the voluntary wearing of face masks in outdoor public areas. The primary objective for the EO is to help the economy recover from the downturn caused by the pandemic. But concerns have been raised by medical practitioners over the policy's implementation and possible behavioral impact on Filipinos.

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According to a *Manila Bulletin* report on the President's meeting with DOH OIC Vergeire last 4 July, Marcos Jr. had said that information campaigns regarding vaccinations should be made a priority. The DOH OIC meanwhile recommended the inclusion of booster shots in the vaccination requirements for the public. The President agreed, the report said. But there was some confusion later on whether or not the President supports Vergeire's proposal after a PNA article that said he does was taken down without explanation.

Healthcare costs added to the worries of Filipinos during the pandemic. In partial response to this, Marcos Jr. pledged in his 25 July SONA that he will coordinate with the pharmaceutical industry and the Philippine Competition Commission to ensure low prices of medicines by fighting cartels and ensuring a competitive market.

Health Institutions

Another one of Marcos Jr.'s main campaign promises centered on the need of provinces to have specialty hospitals, similar to the Philippine Heart Center (PHC) and the National Kidney and Transplant Institute (NKTi). The President reiterated this during his SONA.



In response to lawmakers' claims that there were cuts in the budget of the PHC, NKTi, and other specialty hospitals, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) stated in a budget hearing last 13 September that the 2023 allocations for PHC and NKTi will be the same as what they were in 2022. The DBM also said that the budget for the Lung Center and the Philippine Children's Medical Center will receive budget augmentations.

Healthcare workers

During the campaign, Marcos Jr. promised that once he is president, he will provide more funding to improve the conditions of frontline medical workers by increasing their salaries and benefits. He reemphasized this during his SONA. Yet on 7 September, DOH OIC Vergeire had to ask representatives in Congress to restore the department's proposed PhP 76 billion for health workers' benefits. Under the 2023 proposed national budget, only PhP 20 billion was allocated for the emergency benefits and health allowance of health workers. According to DOH, this will not cover the health workers' needs for the entire 2023. More specifically, it would cover only six months' worth of benefits that they are entitled to as mandated by Republic Act 11712 or the Act granting mandatory benefits and allowances to public and private healthcare workers during the pandemic.

ACT Teachers Party-List Representative France Castro also pointed out that the COVID-19 Human Resources for Health Emergency Hiring was cut by PhP 4.33 billion. Moreover, the COVID-19 Benefit and Health Emergency Allowance (HEA) for 2022 has yet to be released by DOH and the Department of Budget and Management (DBM).

According to DBM, these cuts in the budget for health workers are due to the government's tight fiscal position. Interestingly, the 2023 national budget of PhP 5.269 trillion is 4.86 percent higher than 2022's PhP 5.024 trillion.



Health Financing

The budget of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth), which many Filipinos rely on for hospital and other medical expenses, was raised from PhP 79.99 billion in 2022 to PhP 100.23 billion in the 2023 National Expenditure Program (NEP). This budget will primarily be used for the implementation of the Universal Health Care Law according to DOH OIC Vergeire.

So-called “sin taxes” are also sometimes called “health taxes” because they are slapped on goods that are considered unhealthy, such as tobacco products, sodas, and alcoholic drinks. During the campaign, several health advocates had warned that a Marcos Jr. presidency could reduce the support for the increase in sin taxes because of his family’s links to the tobacco industry. When the President allowed the Vape Bill to lapse into law on 26 July, observers took this as confirming that concern. The Vape Bill, after all, reduces the regulatory measures that prevent young Filipinos from accessing vape products, which health professionals say are harmful to the lungs.

Then on 16 August, during his presentation to the Senate Ways and Means Committee, Finance Secretary Ben Diokno said that the Marcos Jr. administration will not review the Sin Tax Law. In the hearing, Diokno enumerated the current administration’s fiscal policy agenda that includes, among others, value-added tax on digital goods, excise tax on single-use plastic, and the rationalization of the mining fiscal regime. Taxes on goods such as tobacco, alcohol, and sugar-laden beverages taxes were not on the presented list. In a statement on 14 September, however, House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Rep. Joey Salceda has filed a bill to increase ‘sin taxes’ on alcohol, sweetened drinks, and vapes. – **Right to Know, Right Now! Coalition, October 2022**