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Of Trees and Forest

State Should Lead Cancer Fight

MANILA, Philippines — News that Warren Buffett, 81-year-old world's third richest person, has been diagnosed with prostate cancer, prompted me to make a second pitch to push my proposals to make cancer drugs free and to establish facilities devoted to cancer treatment and research.

Buffett, head of the investment firm Berkshire Hathaway, announced to Berkshire shareholders last April 17 that he had been diagnosed with Stage 1 prostate cancer and would undergo radiation treatment beginning in mid-July. Doctors told Buffet that he would be treated with daily radiation for two months.

I searched the Internet for the cost of radiation treatment for prostate cancer. According to a study published by the medical journal Cancer in February 2007, the average cumulative cost of prostate cancer treatment averages \$42,570 for five years. That's R1.83 million at an exchange rate of R43 to a dollar. Another study published by the Journal of Clinical Oncology, average cost of radiation therapy ranges from \$13,765 to \$14,330 per patient or as much as R616,690.00. With a net worth (estimated by Forbes) of \$44 billion as of March 2012), the cost of treatment is the least of worries for Buffett.

Not so for the thousands of Filipinos. Readers, reacting to my earlier column about cancer, told me of the difficulties that their families were undergoing because one of their loved ones had fallen victim to cancer. Here, the so-called chemotherapy for cancer patients may cost about R100,000 per session.

Cancer, as I said before, is now the third leading cause of death in the Philippines, claiming one death for every two new cases within a year. Cancer is estimated to afflict 189 per 100,000 Filipinos. Statistics show that cancer kills four Filipinos every hour or 103 every day.

The incidence and mortality rates of cancer in the Philippines has been increasing in the past three decades, and this trend is expected to continue if organized and sustained specialized care and preventive measures against cancer are not initiated.

This is the best time to act on this very expensive scourge. The government has been claiming an improving fiscal condition, and is able to finance pro-poor programs, including R39 billion for its Conditional Cash Transfer program.

We don't need that much to subsidize medicines for cancer, or to establish a National Cancer Institute, as provided under Senate Bill No. 3141, which I authored. The institute will be mainly responsible for the centralization of planning, programs and activities related to the prevention, screening, detection, diagnosis and treatment of cancer.

The impact, however, will be no less significant as the CCT or other social or health programs.

There are ways to achieve the objectives provided under SB 3141 and to alleviate the sufferings of cancer patients and their families. For instance, the government can utilize public lands like the Food Terminal Inc. in Taguig, the Veterans Hospital property in Quezon City or the Welfareville property in Mandaluyong. These are good locations for cancer hospitals.

I am sure the government also has real estate properties in the Visayas and Mindanao, which can be the sites for cancer hospitals in these areas. With the lands as its investment, the government can partner with private companies to build cancer hospitals and pump-prime the economy.

Establishing cancer hospitals can also be part of an expansion for the University of the Philippines' College of Medicine, which may offer scholarships, the payment for which will be to serve the cancer hospitals for a certain period of time.

Helping cancer patients and their families is not a one-way street. In addition to pump-priming the economy, other opportunities will come. For instance, with the rising number of cancer cases, the cancer hospitals – with guidance from the National Cancer Institute – can be centers for research.

The cancer hospitals may also contribute to medical tourism – as their facilities improve and their reputation grows, patients from other countries may look at the Philippines for treatment.

My point is the state isn't helpless, and it should impart that attitude to Filipinos who have cancer, none of whom are as wealthy as Warren Buffett.

Cancer is such a terrible and strength-sapping disease. We will continue to see many patient die until medical scientists identify its real cause and come up with a real cure.

Until that time comes, we should continue the fight against cancer, and the government should take the lead in this crusade.

(Please send comments/feedback to: mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com)

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