

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

Cheaper Medicines: A Relentless Pursuit (Conclusion)

MANILA, Philippines — The national government has started the preparation of its proposed budget for 2013, and the working figure is Php 2 trillion, a substantial increase from the current year's budget of Php 1.816 trillion.

This is a good opportunity to propose a higher budget for the Department of Health. I realize that the department's current budget of Php 44.4 billion already represents an increase of 34 percent over its budget for 2011. But the health of our people requires additional funds to sustain regular health services and also to cope with new threats like new disease outbreaks, the impact of a growing population, and threats from unscrupulous drug manufacturers, both domestic and foreign.

In particular, I believe the annual budget of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should be increased. In contrast, the budget of the FDA was even reduced from Php 205 million in 2011 to Php 191 million for 2012, according to health officials who testified at the recent hearings conducted by the Senate Committee on Trade and Commerce, which I chair.

The FDA also earned Php 700 million from fees collected from food and drug manufacturers whose products are subjected to laboratory tests before these are approved to be sold to the public. However, the amount had to be turned over to the National Treasury because the National Economic and Development Authority would not allow the FDA to use its income unless it submits a five-year development program that would be funded from the collections.

In the meantime, we are bombarded by reports regarding the proliferation of substandard, even counterfeit, food products and medicines. I don't know if these have reached our shores, but I'm alarmed by reports about the pills that were apprehended by Korean authorities, which were being sold as stamina-boosters but were found to contain powdered human flesh.

Locally, we see an increasing number of reports about diet pills, beauty products and medicine, which contain substances that are hazardous to health. Even baby formulas have not been immune from the activities of unscrupulous manufacturers and traders.

The purpose of the hearings that my committee has been conducting is to come up with proposed amendments to improve the Cheaper Medicines Act and the Generics Act, both of which aim to make quality medicines affordable even to our poor countrymen.

I believe that our campaign will be for naught if we are not able to stop the proliferation of substandard medicines. This is where a stronger FDA, with adequate funding and expert personnel, comes in. We need a reliable watchdog to make sure that food products are safe, and that medicines are manufactured by legitimate companies and are effective.

Amending existing laws like the Cheaper Medicines Act and the Generics Act will take time. My committee has been conducting hearings and consultations since early March, and I am now drafting the proposed amendments.

However, these amendments will have to go through the normal legislative process, from the submission of the committee report to the Senate, transmittal to the House of

Representatives (after three readings in the Senate), to the conference committee, then, hopefully, to Malacañang for signature.

We don't have to wait for the whole process to be done. Some measures may be taken even without amending the law. The Department of Health, perhaps with the support of the Department of Budget and Management, can channel more funds to the FDA to support the agency's activities. The FDA and NEDA may also work together to resolve the issue over the FDA's fee income so it can be used to increase the agency's testing and monitoring activities.

Of course, these suggestions are on top of the increase in the FDA's regular annual budget, beginning in 2013.

Health should always be a priority concern of the government, and a strong and efficient monitoring of medicines is a necessary component of that priority.

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