

Pediatric COVID-19 Response in the Philippines

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented global health crisis, affecting individuals of all ages. In the Philippines, as we continue to combat the virus, we put focus on one particularly vulnerable group: our children.¹ As we confront the complexities of pediatric COVID-19 management, we provide insight into the response strategies established to protect the health of our youngest population.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Philippines undertook a comprehensive approach that encompassed travel restrictions, community interventions, robust risk communication, and rigorous testing procedures. These measures were implemented with the overarching goal of mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and safeguarding the nation's healthcare system.²

On March 30, 2020, the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) officially became the COVID-19 Referral Center in the country. It has been more than four years since that fateful day when we had to brace ourselves for what was about to happen. All of the departments, including the pediatrics department, had risen to the challenge with change in infrastructure, creation of clinical guidelines for COVID-19 management, formulation of infection control measures, and allocation of protective equipment and training for health workers.³

The PGH Transfer Command Center (TCC) was in-charge of triaging, decking, and admitting patients to the hospital.³ During the surges, the TCC was besieged with calls from desperate doctors and relatives with COVID-19 of varying severity – critical, severe, moderate, mild, and asymptomatic. Several projects and programs have sprung to help with the pandemic. An algorithm was created at the time by the Class of 1991 UP College of Medicine, which was a quick, simple, complete, easy-to-understand guideline which navigate patients in their homes.^{4,5} Through a number of medical professional volunteers, the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) COVID Gabay Program was launched to guide families via a teleconsultation platform.⁶

A community preventive approach included the promotion of mask-wearing, physical distancing, and hand hygiene, aligning with recommendations from global health organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).^{7,8} Locally, the Philippine Pediatric Society has issued a parents COVID-19 prevention guide to disease prevention, symptoms, home care, and breastfeeding⁹, and treatment guidelines regarding the disease in children were formulated by the Pediatric Infectious Disease Society to be used by the community and pediatricians¹⁰.

Initially, COVID-19 vaccines in the Philippines were primarily administered to adults. The vaccination campaign targeted healthcare workers, senior citizens, and individuals with comorbidities, as well as its level of acceptability in the community.¹¹ The eligibility for pediatric vaccination depended on regulatory approvals and vaccine availability then. Currently, the vaccination program has expanded to include younger age groups along with COVID-19 booster doses. However, vaccine hesitancy especially by the parents has been a challenge brought about by different factors such as exposure to false information amplified by the media, the community, and the health system.^{12,13}

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector have had profound effects on children as Philippines had one of the longest lockdown period worldwide.¹⁴ As education was reinstated in October 2020, the education department's approach was a combination of remote learning alternatives, including online platforms, educational television and radio broadcasts, and printed study materials. However, the significant challenge lies in the disparities in social circumstances and the absence of adequate resources at home, which has adversely affected numerous students and educators.^{14,15}

The apprehension and worry about contracting the virus, the cessation of in-person classes, the disturbance of their usual daily routines, and the reduction in social interactions with schoolmates all contribute to an increased strain on the mental health of children.¹⁶ In anticipation of the mental health challenges at the pandemic's outset, the Psychological Association of the Philippines compiled a roster of complimentary telemedicine consultations. Furthermore, the Philippine Red Cross initiated a COVID-19 hotline to attend to mental health issues and related concerns. Additionally, the Department of Health has launched nationwide campaigns during the National Mental Health Week.¹⁷

Our commitment to the well-being of our children during this pandemic is a reflection of our society's resilience and compassion. By addressing these challenges and implementing solutions, we can protect the future of our nation.

In conclusion, the pediatric COVID-19 response in the Philippines is a critical endeavor that demands our collective effort. We must prioritize the health, education, and emotional well-being of our children as we navigate these challenging times. Let us work together to ensure that no child is left behind in our journey towards a safer and healthier future.

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