

Primary Care in the Philippine Health System

Health service in the Philippines is provided in the public and private sector in hospitals, group practice clinics, individually-run clinics and midwifery clinics. They range in size from small basic service units operated by individuals to sophisticated tertiary hospitals. Health services are more for curative and personal care and less on preventive care. The private sector accounts for about 60 percent of the national expenditures on health. It also employs over 70 percent of all health professionals in the country. It is patterned from the North American models of health facilities economically dependent on Medicare reimbursement and fee-for-service payments. Health workers in the Philippines are mainly doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists and physical therapists. Majority of these health workers are employed in the private sector and a significant proportion (mainly nurses) are employed overseas. As a result, the private sector continues to be the dominant source of health care financing. The households' out-of-pocket (OOP) payments accounted for 82.5% of all private expenditure in 2005 and increased to 83.5% of all private expenditure. These are the findings of the late and former health secretary Dr. Alberto "Quasi" Romualdez Jr. in his analysis of the Philippine Health System in 2011.¹ What happened since then?

In this issue of our journal, we included a special theme "Primary Care in the Philippine Health System". This is a very important issue to raise discussion and hopefully more research since this may be a pressing concern in the implementation of the Universal Health Care (UHC) reform. The first article by Lavina, et al., describes in general the nature of practice of primary care providers. Family physicians are still mostly in the private sector and a mixed of hospital and free-standing clinic still much the same as in 2011. Another article is by Carpio, which describes the nature and capacity of primary care clinics. The basic structure and available services are described. Because of some services lacking in regular primary care facilities, access to other essential primary services are provide in special facilities or hospitals as described in the paper of Cruz, et al. The paper of Nicodemus, et al. describes the process of care which is the primary care orientation of family practice. This is again a very important issue in the UHC.

Primary care is an endeavor marked by complexity and clinical uncertainty. The World Health Organization defined primary care as "the first level of contact of individuals, the family and the community within the national health system".² Its functions are the "provision of integrated, accessible health care services by clinicians who are accountable for addressing a large majority of personal health care needs, developing a sustained partnership with patients and practicing in the context of family and community".³ Primary care physicians are providers of initial care and continuing point of contact, coordinator, and navigator in the health care delivery system for patients. They refer patients when appropriate for secondary or specialist care. Thus, primary care is the first level of health care where patients consult their health problems. At this level their curative and preventive health needs are provided. It should therefore be available in the community with no barriers to access and utilization. It is a generalist care, focused on the person with a felt health problem in the patient's social context and biomedical process.⁴ This is the vision of the UHC and one of PAFP's organizational priority as it makes itself very relevant to the Philippine health system.

Noel L. Espallardo, MD, MSc, FPAFP
Nicolas R. Gordo, MD, MHA, CFP

References

1. Romualdez, de la Rosa, Flavier et al. The Philippines Health System Review. *Health Systems in Transition*, 2011; 1 (2): p 7-14.
2. World Health Organization: *From Alma-Ata to the year 2000. Reflections at the midpoint*. Geneva 1988.
3. Donaldson M, Yordy K, Lohr K, Vanselow N: *Primary care: America's health in a new era*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 1996.
4. Kringos DS, Boerma WG, Bourqueil Y, Cartier T, Hasvold T, Hutchinson A, Lember M, Oleszczyk M, Pavlic DR, Svab I, Tedeschi P, Wilson A, Windak A, Dedeu T, Wilm S. The European primary care monitor: structure, process and outcome indicators. *BMC Fam Pract* 2010;11:81.