

Novartis supports global partnership to stop leprosy transmission

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The Novartis Foundation and Novartis Healthcare Philippines joined key stakeholders from around the world in pledging to foster a global partnership to stop leprosy. The major leprosy control stakeholders made their pledge during the 20th International Leprosy Congress (ILC) held on September 11-13, 2019 at the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC) in Pasay City.

During the congress, the Leprosy Alert and Response Network System (LEARNS), the Philippines' first mobile phone-based leprosy detection system, was recognized as a valuable tool for leprosy case finding, diagnosis and surveillance. Dr. Arturo Cunanan, Jr., Chief of the Culem Sanitarium and General Hospital in Palawan, highlighted the role of LEARNS in accelerating diagnosis and treatment. The DOH Center for Health Development VI team's poster presentation highlighted LEARNS as a systematic active contact tracing approach using data collected for the past five years. Several countries including India and Nepal have expressed interest in replicating LEARNS.

In his inspirational message, Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, Chairman of the Nippon Foundation (TNF) of Japan and WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, stressed that leprosy is not only a medical issue, but also a human rights issue, lamenting that in some countries leprosy patients are denied treatment because of prejudice and discrimination. He also acknowledged the Multi-Drug Therapy (MDT) medicines donated by Novartis to the World Health Organization (WHO). "Since 2000, thanks to Novartis, MDT medicines are continuously being supplied for free today. I'd like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Novartis." MDT is a combination of three antibiotics and is considered the most effective treatment for leprosy. Two of the antibiotics used in MDT were developed by Novartis.

"The Novartis Foundation is privileged to be part of a global partnership to advance our common goal of making leprosy history. Our involvement in the partnership builds on three decades of experience in the area, and a long-standing commitment to exploring innovative ways to interrupt the transmission of leprosy," said Mark Alexandre Rogers, Senior Global Program Head, Novartis Foundation.

As part of this long-standing commitment, the Novartis Foundation has pioneered approaches in leprosy diagnostics, and approaches to leprosy screening using digital technology. One of these innovative approaches is LEARNS. The Novartis Foundation worked with the Department of Health (DOH), Department of Science and Technology (DOST), local IT company Metahelix and Novartis Healthcare Philippines in developing LEARNS.

LEARNS allows frontline healthcare providers to send images of suspect leprosy lesions and symptoms via SMS or via an app to a specialist, who can decide on further diagnostic actions to verify the diagnosis.

LEARNS currently covers 14 provinces in five regions, with phased nationwide scale-up by the DOH in progress. To date, close to 5,000 healthcare providers have been trained in LEARNs across the nation. A technical toolkit of LEARNs is being prepared, so that this validated digital health solution can be transferred to other locations and replicated in other countries.

“Novartis will continue to work with partner stakeholders around the world in implementing the Novartis Foundation’s four-pillar strategy to interrupt the transmission of leprosy. This strategy includes early diagnosis and prompt treatment for all leprosy patients, screening and post-exposure prophylaxis for people who have contact with newly diagnosed patients, development of new diagnostic tools and surveillance systems that trigger swift intervention,” said Ms. Christine Fajardo, Corporate Affairs Head, Novartis Healthcare Philippines.

The ILC is organized at approximately 5-year intervals by the International Leprosy Association (ILA), a professional society of physicians, scientists, and individuals and organizations in related areas dedicated to providing up-to-date, medically and scientifically accurate information about leprosy to all professionals who desire such knowledge. This year’s ILC was themed “Global Partnership in Addressing Current Challenges: Zero Transmission. Zero Disability. Zero Discrimination.” It aimed to review progress made in implementing the WHO Global Leprosy Strategy 2016-2020 since the 19th ILC held in China in 2016 and foster a global partnership that is inclusive in order to pool all resources, all opportunities and to achieve this ambitious goal of stopping the transmission of leprosy.

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