

Novartis renews commitment to support DOH goal of leprosy-free Philippines

Jan 28, 2021

- In observance of World Leprosy Day (WLD), Novartis and the Novartis Foundation renewed their commitment to support the Department of Health in completing the last mile in the fight against leprosy and achieving their shared goal of a leprosy-free Philippines.
- One of the key outputs of the DOH-Novartis Task Force is the Leprosy Alert and Response Network System (LEARNS), the country's first mobile phone-based leprosy teleconsultation system. LEARNS enables community health workers with smartphones to send photographs of suspicious-looking skin lesions that can be the first symptoms of leprosy, and send these images to reference specialists.
- Building on the success of LEARNS, the Novartis Foundation is working with Microsoft to develop a tool using artificial intelligence (AI) to detect leprosy with the help of image analysis.

January 28, 2021 – For over 30 years, Novartis and the Novartis Foundation have been working with partners around the world on innovative approaches to eliminate leprosy.

"In observance of World Leprosy Day, we renew our commitment to support the Department of Health in completing the last mile in the fight against leprosy and achieving our shared goal of a leprosy-free Philippines," said Mr. Jugo Tsumura, President and Managing Director, Novartis Healthcare Philippines, Inc.

Celebrated every year on the last Sunday of January, World Leprosy Day (WLD) aims to raise public awareness on leprosy, including the medical and social implications of the disease and the rights of persons affected. This year's WLD theme is "Beat Leprosy" and calls on the international community to help spread the word that leprosy is curable, join in the fight to end stigma, and advocate for the mental wellbeing of persons who have experienced leprosy and other neglected tropical diseases.

The Philippines eliminated leprosy at the national level in 1998. However, there are still pockets of new leprosy cases in the country. An average of 1,500 to 2,000 new leprosy cases have been registered each year from 2014 to 2018, according to the DOH. Gaps in healthcare, particularly in remote rural areas, hinder prompt diagnosis and treatment of leprosy. Moreover, the continued stigma against people affected by leprosy discourages them from seeking help when first symptoms appear, causing delay in diagnosis and development of disabilities. Many people affected by leprosy are unable to work due to disability caused by the disease or may face stigma that prevents them from working.

To address this challenge, the DOH is implementing the National Leprosy Control Program (NLCP) in partnership with other government agencies, local government units (LGUs), civil society groups and the private sector. "The NLCP aims to achieve a leprosy-free Philippines by the year 2022 by ensuring the provision of comprehensive, integrated quality leprosy services at all levels of healthcare in the country," said Dr. Leda Hernandez Chief, DOH Infectious Disease Office. She stressed the importance of making adequate anti-leprosy drug or multiple drug therapy (MDT) medications available in increasing the number of successfully treated cases. Counseling, patient education as well as intensive follow-up through monitoring can contribute to treatment success, she added.

MDT consists of three antibiotics, including two compounds developed by Novartis predecessor companies.

MDT has helped reduce the number of leprosy cases by more than half from 5.3 million in 1985 to 2.2 million in 1993. In the past 20 years alone, more than 16 million leprosy patients have been treated with MDT. Since 2000, Novartis has been providing MDT free of charge to leprosy patients via the World Health Organization. The company donated more than 56 million blister packs valued at above 90 million US dollars. These efforts helped treat over 6 million patients worldwide, including those from the Philippines. In 2015, as part of its commitment to the London Declaration on Neglected Tropical Diseases, Novartis announced the extension of its MDT donation program through to 2020.

In 2012, the DOH and Novartis Foundation signed a Memorandum of Understanding and formed the DOH-Novartis Task Force to help develop innovative approaches to leprosy control in line with the broader NLCP. One of its key outputs is the Leprosy Alert and Response Network System (LEARNS), the country's first mobile phone-based leprosy teleconsultation system.

LEARNS enables community health workers with smartphones to send photographs of suspicious-looking skin lesions that can be the first symptoms of leprosy, and send these images to reference specialists. It is now being implemented in 29 provinces in 9 regions, with over 6,000 healthcare providers already trained in the system, allowing them to accelerate leprosy diagnosis significantly and to correctly identify 75 percent of suspect leprosy lesions.

Building on the success of LEARNS, the Novartis Foundation is working with Microsoft to develop a tool using artificial intelligence (AI) to detect leprosy with the help of image analysis. The new diagnosis accelerator is based on images of skin lesions mainly from Brazil, which has one of the highest numbers of leprosy patients worldwide. The result of this process will be a proof-of-concept that AI can be applied to recognize leprosy skin lesions. This could then hopefully be used on a mobile phone. The application could potentially allow any user to photograph a skin lesion, send it to the cloud and receive from the AI algorithm a probability of the lesion being leprosy. This could provide decision support to inform further diagnostic steps.

About Novartis

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