

DOH, Novartis Foundation renew public-private partnership on leprosy control

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- *Assistant Secretary of Health Dr. Maria Francia Laxamana representing Secretary of Health Dr. Paulyn Ubial and Dr. Juergen Brokatzky-Geiger, Global Corporate Responsibility Head of Novartis AG, representing the Novartis Foundation, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the Department of Health-Novartis Leprosy Task Force in the official residence of the Swiss Ambassador to the Philippines, H.E. Andrea Reichlin.*
- *The Leprosy Task Force aims to promote evidence-based innovation and stakeholder participation, aligned with the broader goals of the National Leprosy Control Program and its Roadmap for 2016-2022.*

For the fifth consecutive year, the Department of Health (DOH) and the Novartis Foundation renewed their public-private partnership on leprosy control in the Philippines.

Assistant Secretary of Health Dr. Maria Francia Laxamana representing Secretary of Health Dr. Paulyn Ubial and Dr. Juergen Brokatzky-Geiger, Global Corporate Responsibility Head of Novartis AG, representing the Novartis Foundation, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on January 17, 2017 in the official residence of the Swiss Ambassador to the Philippines, H.E. Andrea Reichlin, in Makati City.

“As we enter the challenging last mile of leprosy control, public-private partnerships and evidence-based innovation are now more than ever crucial in achieving our goal of a leprosy-free Philippines. The DOH is committed to maintaining leprosy elimination in the country under the public-private partnership on leprosy post-elimination strategy,” said Assistant Secretary Laxamana.

“To truly make leprosy history, we need to adopt a comprehensive, collaborative strategy. This strategy should be anchored on four pillars: early detection and treatment, contact tracing and preventative treatment, strengthening of surveillance systems, and development of reliable diagnostic tools for faster and earlier diagnosis. Interrupting disease transmission and preventing disability will require evidence-based, innovative approaches to early diagnosis and treatment,” said Dr. Brokatzky-Geiger.

In 1998, the Philippines achieved the elimination target of a national leprosy prevalence rate of less than 1 in 10,000 population. However, there are still a few pockets in the country with relatively high prevalence rates of leprosy, and the Philippines remains as the leading contributor of new cases of leprosy in the WHO Western Pacific Region.

In January 2012, the DOH and the Novartis Foundation organized the 1st Leprosy Stakeholders Symposium in Puerto Princesa, Palawan. The groundbreaking symposium underscored the need for a serious post-elimination strategy that would address challenges in leprosy control, namely the slow decrease in leprosy cases and the low level of attention directed at leprosy control.

To address this need, the DOH and the Novartis Foundation signed a MoU on April 2012 and agreed to form a Task Force that would, together with other key stakeholders, draw up a comprehensive post-elimination strategy. A key output of the Task Forces is the LEprosy Alert and Response Network System (LEARNS), the country's first mobile phone-based leprosy referral system. Developed by the DOH, the Philippine Council for

Health Research and Development, Metahelix, Novartis Healthcare Philippines and the Novartis Foundation, LEARNS is designed to work within existing leprosy control and monitoring initiatives of the DOH and local government units. It enables frontline healthcare providers to send images of suspected cases of leprosy to a specialist via mobile phone, helping to reduce delays in diagnosis and treatment of new leprosy patients.

From 2013 to 2014, LEARNS was successfully piloted in Iloilo province, leading to its adoption in nine cities in Cebu province. To date, over 4,000 healthcare providers have been trained in LEARNS nationwide. In 2015 and 2016, the DOH and the Leprosy Task Force expanded LEARNS to three additional regions, using a phased approach. Two versions of LEARNS have been evaluated and will be scaled up by the National Leprosy Control Program as part of its Manual of Operations.

“With the signing of our MoU this year, Novartis and the Novartis Foundation renew our commitment to work with the DOH and other stakeholders in developing evidence-based, innovative interventions aimed at interrupting leprosy transmission, particularly through LEARNS, a key initiative of the Task Force,” said Dr. Brokatzky-Geiger. “The DOH-Novartis Foundation Leprosy Task Force serves as a model for collaboration and public-private partnerships to promote innovation and stakeholder engagement, as well as meaningful participation of persons affected by leprosy.”

The MoU between the DOH and the Novartis Foundation aims to support the goals of the National Leprosy Control Program Roadmap 2016-2022. Areas of cooperation include supporting the drafting of innovative post-elimination strategies that focus on differentiating between high-, medium- and low-endemic areas; strengthening the health infrastructure; and extending initiatives to cover other neglected tropical diseases. Pilot projects that can be integrated into the National Leprosy Control Program will be identified, particularly those that incorporate technology in the post-elimination strategy. The MoU also aims to design pilot interventions and direct interested stakeholders to form and manage working groups and project teams in implementing the interventions.

The MoU signing is part of the activities celebrating 60 years of bilateral ties between Switzerland and the Philippines, which has been characterized by regular political dialogue, extensive trade and ad hoc humanitarian aid operations after natural disasters. It is also a preparatory step for the country's hosting of the 20th International Leprosy Congress in 2019. Held every three years, the congress gathers scientists, researchers, health personnel, partner organizations and individuals affected by leprosy to interact, discuss and share experiences in a variety of fields.

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