

The Status of Infectious Disease Research in the Philippines

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Infectious disease is one of the more important health problems in the Philippines. In 1996, according to the Modified Field Health Service Information System Health Intelligence Service (MFHSIS), 9 out of the 10 leading causes of morbidity are due to infectious diseases (diarrhea, pneumonia, bronchitis, influenza, respiratory tuberculosis, malaria, chicken pox and dengue). Furthermore, 5 out of the 10 leading causes of mortality are due to infectious diseases. There are institutions involved in health researches. The Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM), initially initiated and supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), is the primary research arm of the Department of Health. The Bureau of Research Laboratory (BRL), which aims to provide quality laboratory service to the public, serves to be a reference laboratory for the Philippine Centers for disease control. The State Universities, particularly the University of the Philippines System is also doing a number of basic and applied researches in the area of tropical diseases. Other government hospitals and speciality organizations further contribute to the data on the status of tropical diseases in the country. Private medical centers, such as the Makati Medical Center which houses the Tropical Disease Foundation and recently the Research and Biotechnology Division of the St. Luke's Medical Center are further contributing to the researches on tropical infectious diseases.

One of the councils under the Philippine Department of Science and Technology, the Philippine Council for Health Research and Development (PCHRD) is tasked to manage health-related researches in the country. Communicable diseases has been identified as one of the priority areas aside from health problems of mother and child, nutritional concerns, degenerative and metabolic diseases, environment and occupational health problems, health economics and policy research. An inventory of health researches from 1994 to 1996 has been prepared by PCHRD and features 636 completed and ongoing health and medical researches. The data found in this inventory were obtained from different agencies and institutions both in MetroManila and surrounding provinces. Other important informations were also obtained from annual reports, proceedings from scientific meetings, as well as related materials from different libraries. The contents of the inventory are available online thru a computerized database retrieval system termed Health Research and Development Information Network (HERDIN).

But what is the real status of tropical disease research? According to the above mentioned inventory of health researches from 1994 to 1996, out of the 636 listed completed and ongoing projects, only 80 (12.6%) are related to infectious diseases, despite this being a priority area. Of the 80 listed projects, most dealt with bacterial diseases (50) such as

researches on tuberculosis, typhoid, syphilis, *H. pylori*, and others, followed by viral diseases such as AIDS/HIV, hepatitis, dengue, ebola and measles. Out of the 11 projects on protozoan diseases, 10 were on malaria and only 1 on Entamoeba. There were 4 projects that dealt on helminths.

Another way to view the current status of scientific capability is through publications in international, refereed journals such as those listed in the indexes of the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) or thru computerized database such as Medline. From 1995 to 1998, there are only 43 published researches relating to infectious diseases in the Philippines. Bacterial diseases ranked the highest with 14 papers most on tuberculosis followed by 13 papers related to viral diseases, 6 of which were on AIDS/HIV. There were 11 papers on protozoan diseases mainly on malaria with 1 paper on entamoeba and 5 papers on Helminths reporting mainly on schistosoma.

The idea of what truly constitutes a research is still a problem in the Philippines. While there is an honest intent to disseminate information and findings, publication in a reputable international refereed journal does not seem to be taken as an important factor. As mentioned by Prof. Flor Lacanilao of the University of the Philippines, publication in reputable international journals reflect the scientific capabilities and achievements of a country. International publications ensures accessibility of data for validation by experts. Through publication, the objective of research is gained and that is to generate valid information and contribute to knowledge.

Hence, while tropical diseases has been identified as a priority research area both by government and private institutions, there is still much room for improvement in the quality of research on tropical diseases in the Philippines.