



Exploring the essential need for developing COVID-19 vaccines in the Philippines

Clin Exp Vaccine Res 2023;12:260-261
<https://doi.org/10.7774/cevr.2023.12.3.260>
 pISSN 2287-3651 • eISSN 2287-366X

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Received: March 8, 2023

Accepted: July 17, 2023

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No potential conflict of interest relevant to this
 article was reported.

Dear Editor,

I am interested in the recent article published in this journal regarding the experience of developing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccines in Iran. The authors appropriately presented the necessity of widespread public vaccination during health crises. They emphasized that vaccine development was a complex process that requires firm-level capabilities, various infrastructures, long-term planning, and stable and efficient policies [1]. In this regard, the Philippines can learn from the vaccine development experience of Iran since both are categorized as developing countries. At the same time, the government has finally started planning to establish its vaccine development plan to address the shortage/unavailability of vaccines and vaccine hesitancy among local citizens.

In the current data reported to the World Health Organization, there have been 4,076,237 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 66,108 deaths from 3 January 2020 to 28 February 2023. These alarming figures could have been prevented, especially the number of deaths if the first dose of vaccines had arrived earlier or had been available during the first months of the pandemic. Unfortunately, the first tranche of CoronaVac vaccine doses from China's Sinovac Biotech arrived after almost a year, in February 2021, making it one of the last countries in Southeast Asia to start vaccinating its residents [2]. In the same way, even if vaccines were already available, many locals are hesitant to get inoculated due to several reasons and myths, such as the life span of those who are vaccinated is shortened; vaccines are viewed as unnecessary and insufficient to prevent disease; the young ones do not need the vaccines, but only those at high risk, especially the elderly and persons with comorbidities; the vaccine can give you COVID-19 since it contains the virus; the vaccine can cause infertility among women, persons with an allergy should not get the vaccine, and other participants cited that other countries did not recognize a specific brand. Thus, they are ineffective [3,4]. If vaccines are locally manufactured and explained well in Filipino culture and tradition, then there is the possibility of more acceptance and addressing the hesitancy.

Just like in Iran, where the development of the COVID-19 vaccine was accelerated due to simultaneous cooperation and competition of various research centers/companies, and there was enough government financial/regulatory support [1], these same factors must also be given priority in the Philippines. It is good that several research centers have started to work hard for its cause, like the Philippine Council for Health Research and Development, the National Institutes of Health, and the Re-



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search Institute for Tropical Medicine. Several vaccine companies, both local and abroad, are also interested in investing in facilities and bulk production of vaccines in the country, such as Glovax Biotech Corporation, potential foreign investors such as the United States Agency for International Development, Development Finance Corporation, International Finance Corporation, and Impact Investment Exchange of Singapore [5]. For regulatory support, the Department of Science and Technology has planned to establish the Virology Science and Technology Institute of the Philippines (VIP), which will be the government's main project for developing vaccines and therapeutics, and biomedical devices. Given the health sector's emerging needs brought about by COVID-19, the VIP has been a priority of the Marcos administration, along with the proposed Centers for Disease Control, due to their importance in boosting the Philippines' capacity in dealing with current and future pandemics [5].

The use of vaccines remains one of the effective ways to prevent the spread of any disease. When someone is vaccinated, they are very likely to be protected against the disease and those in the community. If there is a local production of vaccines in the country, the problems of shortage and unavailability during health crises will be avoided. It needs a long-term plan and collaborative support from the government and private sectors to achieve the goal. However, a country's healthcare system is always a top priority, thus, worth preparing for.

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