

## Editorial: Laboratory spotlight

# Healthcare and Biomedical Laboratory Science Practice in the Philippines



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The Philippines is an archipelago composed of 3 major islands and approximately 7,100 small islands. Most of its population of 110 million reside in key cities and urban municipalities making the delivery of healthcare challenging.

### How is healthcare delivered in the Philippines?

The healthcare delivery system in the Philippines is dominated by the public sector (regional, provincial, municipal, and barangay level) while being supported by private healthcare service providers. The implementation of Universal Health Care (UHC) is already driving the demand across all sectors of healthcare. However, the Philippines still requires a strong focus on infrastructure and skilled manpower.<sup>1</sup>

The government established PHILHEALTH, the Philippines insurance corporation, with the vision that by 2020 100% of citizens would be enrolled. To date approximately 92% are enrolled. Although the insurance system gives citizens access to healthcare, however the lack of infrastructure and human resources are major concerns. For example there are not enough hospital beds in a major part of the country. Individuals who can afford to go to a private hospital have access to advanced diagnostic methodologies and care, whereas others who cannot afford the fees charged in private hospitals seek care at government operated hospitals.



There are three levels of healthcare facilities: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary level healthcare facilities include clinics for specific diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis, clinics for employees of large companies, community hospitals. Secondary level health care facilities are smaller hospitals focusing upon specific diseases and conditions that include emergency and regional hospitals. Tertiary healthcare facilities provide are sites where highly sophisticated and technological services are offered by medical centers, large hospitals and specialized national hospitals

### How are laboratories organized within the healthcare delivery system? Are they integrated, separate, independent?

There are three classifications of laboratories in the Philippines: (1) integrated laboratories are under the management of the hospital; (2) partnership laboratories are located inside the hospital however the management is independent from the hospital and have profit sharing; and (3) free standing laboratories which are outside of the laboratory and independently managed.

Furthermore, testing performed in laboratories is different: primary - where only basic laboratory procedures are performed; secondary where some advanced testing such as serology and microbiology testing are performed; and lastly, tertiary which are laboratories licensed to perform all laboratory procedures including research.

## **What are the education requirements for the Biomedical Laboratory Scientists? What title is used for Biomedical Laboratory Scientists?**

In the Philippines, the professionals who work in laboratories or diagnostic medicine are called Medical Technologists. Our profession was established under the Republic Act 5527 of 1969 also known as the "Medical Technology Act". Section 6 of this Act states the minimum required education for Medical Technologists is at least 4 years with 12 months satisfactory internship at an accredited laboratory.



In order to be eligible for licensure, applicants for the medical technologist examinee need to have successfully completed an accredited medical technology program. Once eligibility has been verified, applicants must complete an online application, pay the fees, and prepare for and take the examinations. After passing the licensure exam they will earn the title as Registered Medical Technologist/ RMT.

The shortage of qualified personnel still exists and is considered to be a huge problem, especially in high-skill fields such as radiology, pharmacy, nursing and medical technology. The private sector is playing a significant role in helping the government address the gaps in healthcare services by allowing more colleges and universities to offer courses in these professions. Medical Centers and hospitals are permitting more medical technology students to complete their internships, providing them more experiences in the field.

## **What are the strengths of the health care delivery system?**

Overall, the healthcare system in the Philippines, including diagnostic medicine, is of a high standard. Filipino medical staff, especially medical technologists are expertly trained, but the facilities may not be as impressive as those found in developed countries.

The quality of the Philippines' state-subsidized public healthcare, although good, varies widely between rural and urban areas. Private healthcare in the Philippines provides much more consistent care and facilities tend to be better equipped than public ones. English is also spoken throughout the Philippines, meaning that there should be few language barriers preventing tourists and foreigners from accessing healthcare.<sup>2</sup>

The government allocated \$3.2 billion to healthcare last year but due to the pandemic most of the funds were realigned to the prevention and control of the Covid-19 disease. Private hospitals and laboratories strengthen delivery of quality healthcare especially in the areas where government services are not available due to budget constraints. Private hospitals have invested in increasing infrastructure and training which decreased the burden and influx of patients in the limited accommodation for patients in government medical centers. Because private hospitals cater to citizens who can afford to pay for their healthcare the government focuses on the poor and less privileged.



On a positive note, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased collaboration of different stakeholders in healthcare leading to an improvement in the delivery of healthcare for all. Collaboration has helped medical technologists face the challenges of diagnosis and detection of Covid-19 as well as control of the spread of the infection and distribution of information. This has been particularly important to provide these services to people who do not reside in populated areas or the main islands.

## What are the challenges facing the healthcare delivery system?

Medical Technologists working in public hospitals are highly proficient; however diagnostic medicine in public hospitals faces some limitations. Despite having achieved universal healthcare, the Philippines still struggles with unequal access to medical care. As such, the standard of public healthcare in the Philippines generally varies from excellent in urban centers to poor in rural areas. Public healthcare also faces strain both from treating the large number of Filipinos who rely on public healthcare and from the trend of Filipino medical staff (including medical technologists) migrating to western countries.<sup>3</sup> This has resulted in understaffing in some hospital laboratories and patients may experience delays in testing and releasing of results.

Laboratories in the private healthcare sector are well-established and growing in the Philippines. Although medical technologists in private hospitals are as good as medical technologists practicing in the public sector, private facilities are much better equipped and testing is typically completed faster. Private services are considered to be expensive by locals, but are relatively inexpensive by most foreigners and tourists. The relative affordability of private healthcare can be seen in the increasing popularity of the Philippines as a medical tourism destination.<sup>4</sup>



1. Treasurer, Philippine Association of Medical Technologists
2. President, Philippine Association of Medical Technologists

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