

A year of mercury-free drive marked

To mark one year of the campaign to phase out mercury from all the country's health-care facilities, Health Care Without Harm-Southeast Asia (HCWH-SEA), the Department of Health (DOH), and the World Health Organization (WHO) held free temperature and blood-pressure screening in Quezon City using mercury-free instruments.

"We want to inform everyone that shifting to mercury-free devices is safe, and economically and ecologically possible," said Faye Ferrer, HCWH-SEA program officer.

Dr. Soe Nyunt-U, WHO representative to the Philippines, commended the Philippines for being the first country in Southeast Asia to mandate all health-care facilities to stop the distribution of mercury thermometers to patients, submit an inventory of all mercury-containing devices when applying for a license, and create a mercury-minimization program. "The Philippines is way ahead of this global initiative," Nyunt-U said. "If all sectors of the society will collaborate toward this goal, I am sure that the Philippine health-care system will achieve major milestones for the mercury-free initiative in 2010."

The DOH issued Administrative Order 21 on September 28, 2008



PHOTO: Southline/Alga

MERCURY-FREE Q.C.

Quezon City Mayor Feliciano Belmonte Jr. gets his blood pressure measured with a mercury-free sphygmomanometer during the city's celebration of the first anniversary of the campaign to rid health-care of mercury.

to raise awareness on the dangers of mercury, develop a clear preference for the use of alternatives to devices containing mercury, and prevent further mercury exposure to the environment.

Dr. Edwin Sanchez, head of the committee that drafted the order, urged Quezon City's hospitals to be the leader in the gradual phase-out of mercury use. "Being the largest city in Metro Manila, Quezon City has a big impact on this phase-out," he said.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that could be fatal if inhaled and absorbed by the skin. Exposure to it may lead to tremors, impaired vision and hearing, paralysis, insomnia, emotional instability, developmental deficits during fetal development, and attention deficit and developmental delays during childhood.

In health-care facilities, mercury can be found in medical equipment such as sphygmomanometers, thermometers, laboratory staining solutions and preservatives, feeding tubes, and gastrointestinal diagnostic equipment.

Sen. Manny Villar, Quezon City mayor Feliciano Belmonte and vice mayor Herbert Bautista, and actor Albert Martinez were also present to support the mercury-free initiative. **M Arian Rabino**

Vaccination is a child's right—PFV

Vaccination is a right—not a privilege—that every Filipino child should enjoy, the Philippine Foundation for Vaccination (PFV) said as it marked its 10th anniversary with a convention that had for its theme *Looking back, moving forward*.

Children have their rights too, and it is a social right of children to be vaccinated, declared Dr. Lulu Bravo, executive director of the PFV, at the opening of the society's annual meeting that focused on the medical society's 10 years of advocacy on immunization.

"PFV was conceptualized 10 years ago because the immunization coverage in the Philippines went down. The society realized that the government cannot address this problem by itself," said Bravo.

"As we look back, we are proud to say that we have eliminated polio in the country. However, we are still struggling in eliminating measles and neonatal tetanus," said Dr. Eric Tayag, director of the Department of Health's National Epidemiology Center and PFV president. "We want to share with all our vision of being the 'champion for disease prevention through vaccination for a healthy Filipino nation.' Vaccines give us the edge over diseases," he added.

Bravo said the PFV is widening the reach of its vaccination advocacy through networking and partnership with international agen-



G. O. Hernandez

FOR WIDER VACCINE COVERAGE

Dr. Yolanda Oliveros (third from left), director of the National Center for Disease Prevention and Control, and Dr. Lulu Bravo, lead the opening of the annual convention and 10th anniversary celebration of the Philippine Foundation for Vaccination.

cies and organizations such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund; educating the people and doctors on the importance of vaccination; encouraging and supporting research on vaccines and immunization practices; and generating resources to support the mission and vision of the foundation.

She summed up the PFV's in mission in the coming years in four letters—ASAP—which stand for awareness, surveillance, advocacy, and prevention.

The PFV aims to raise the coverage for vaccines covered in the expanded program on immunization (EPI) to 90 percent by 2015, and include new vaccines for all ages and special-risk groups. In 2006, the *Haemophilus influenzae* type B vaccine was included in the EPI.

Among the speakers in the convention were Dr. Yolanda Oliveros on strengthening the EPI; Dr. Howard Sobel on maintaining polio eradication, moving toward measles elimination by 2012, and achieving rubella control; Dr. Luis Jodar on and the challenges and opportunities of introducing new vaccines in low-resource settings; and Dr. Lyndon Lee Suy on ensuring equitable distribution of the H1N1 vaccine. **M Marijoe Yu**

Autism Hearts holds meet Feb.

Autism Hearts Philippines, the newly established local affiliate of United States-based Autism Hearts Foundation, will host the first-ever International Autism Conference February 3 to 5 next year at the Philippine International Convention Center.

The conference will gather medical experts all over the world to present the most current research, knowledge, information, diagnosis, assessment, treatments, and policies surrounding autism-spectrum disorders (ASD) in support of people under the spectrum and their families.

“Concerned individuals including health practitioners and teachers from all over the world will find their participation greatly beneficial as the conference will also highlight the launching of the Autism Institute of Asia, a locally based ‘state-of-the-art, one-stop enter for research, treatment, therapy, support, and services for children with ASD and their families, and the New York-based advocacy group Autism Speaks’ Global Autism Public Health Initiative in the Philippines,” said Christine Roa, executive director of Autism Hearts Philippines.

Among the speakers in the conference are leading experts from the Medical Investigation of Neurodevelopmental Disorders Institute, University of California Davis, an international, multidisciplinary research organization based in Sacramento, California.

Roa said that, through this initiative, the Philippines would have the opportunity to tell the world about the initiatives being undertaken by both the government and the private sector on the care of people with ASD. It would also help highlight the closely knit family values of Filipinos. “There is, indeed, a brighter tomorrow for people with autism. We just need to make it happen together,” she added.

An estimated 500,000 Filipinos suffer from ASD, a developmental disorder marked with impairments in social interaction and communication. Only five percent of them, however, get diagnosed while only two percent are given appropriate care.

Although people with autism are unable to function as self-sufficient adults with the effects of autism generally persisting throughout their lives, the right services and support can help them live full, healthy, and meaningful lives. Thus, for families of people with autism, a new educational approach, therapy, or treatment would always be looked forward to with great enthusiasm and hope, Roa said.

Autism Hearts Foundation is dedicated to improving the quality of life for people with autism and their families by fostering state-of-the-art research and developing programs, services, and specialized training, said Roa. Autism Hearts envisions a world where each person with ASD receives the highest level of customized care and treatment, education, and lifelong support they deserve to become happy,

Focus on multidisciplinary care

“It takes a village to help a person cope with cancer,” said cancer-prevention-and-care advocate Robert Suntay during the annual meet of the Philippine Society of Oncology (PSO). “Cancer treatments, no matter how advanced they are, fail to address fully the emotional needs of a patient,” he added.

He cited several studies that showed how psychological and social problems could affect the efficacy of cancer treatments. According to Suntay, there are instances where doctors tend to underestimate the psychosocial needs of a cancer patient. “If the psychosocial needs of cancer patients are unmet, it’s harder for them to respond positively to the treatments given by the doctors and recover from cancer,” he said.

To improve a cancer patient’s quality of life, Suntay recommended that there should be a range of services available to patients and their families. Psychosocial-health services such as support groups, cancer talks, seminars, wellness activities, and even financial support should be made available.

He cited the importance of establishing cancer patient support groups. “People with cancer need not feel helpless, hopeless, and alone,” said Suntay, also a founder of the Carewell Community, a not-for-profit foundation that provides support, education, and hope to cancer-stricken patients and their loved ones.

“Doctors also need to develop a vision of social care to address their patients’ unmet psychosocial needs,” he added. “They should have a model that will enable them to identify patients with psychosocial needs and help these patients develop plans to address these needs.”

Suntay also stressed the need to generate research and evidence-based data on the value of psychosocial care. Above all, effective communication and cooperation are crucial tools in developing a positive partnership between support providers, doctors, cancer patients, and their families to optimize multidisciplinary care.

“Our society’s vision is for every Filipino to receive compassionate cancer care, hence this year’s theme of optimizing multidisciplinary cancer care,” said Dr. Luzviminda Kwong, PSO president. “We want to integrate all the available modes in treating cancer to give cancer patients the best approach to cancer care.”

The convention featured lectures on breast cancer, colorectal cancer, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, nasopharyngeal cancer, concurrent chemotherapy and radiotherapy, spinal metastasis (kyphoplasty), rectal-cancer care, lung cancer, and nutrition and total care of the cancer patient. **M Marijoe Yu**

productive members of society. It hopes to achieve this vision by helping maximize the potential of children and adults with ASD to enable them to learn, develop, function independently and participate in a full range of social, cultural, and life experiences. **M**



SAVING LIVES

Dr. Betty Dodet, coordinator and consultant for the Asian Rabies Expert Bureau (AREB) addresses the group’s recent sixth annual meeting on ways to eliminate human deaths caused by rabies in Asia. Also in photo are (from left) Dr. Raffy Deray, National Rabies Prevention and Control Program manager; Dr. Beatriz Quiambao, clinical research division chief at the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine; Dr. Deborah Briggs, executive director of the Alliance for Rabies Control; Dr. Thiravat Hemachudha from Thailand, and Dr. Nasem Salahuddin from Pakistan.