

'Vaccination is key': Herd immunity is a far-from-possible dream by Theriz Lizel Silvano and Meggie Carpio

"You want the pandemic to end? Get vaccinated."

The universal health crisis led by the death-dealing Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is like an unwanted visitor arriving at one's party -- it shocked all the guests and interfered with their traditional festivities.

The pandemic surprisingly brought complex dilemmas and events that burdened those who contracted the threatening virus, harmed financial factors of households particularly impoverished families, and debilitated healthcare workers, among others. It also disrupted the operations and works of all sectors and industries.

For almost two years living with lockdown policies and under isolation umbrellas, as well as counting the days for when financial aids and food assistance will come, Filipinos seem to have come to terms with the virus. They continued their routines and norms -- dining in restaurants, going to parks, and even exercising at gyms -- all while living in a pandemic season.

However, the simple yet comprehensible quote above by Dr. Karla Bañares, an infectious disease specialist in Pasig City Children's Hospital, suggests what appears like an easy path to the road of ending the pandemic.

Easing pandemic experiences and reaching herd immunity through vaccination is a pipe dream.

This is due to the fact that not every Filipino is willing to be vaccinated, looking for a specific vaccine brand, or worse, there are little to no supplies of vaccines at all.

Achieving herd immunity requires laborious efforts and strategies from not only the government and the health sector, but also by the general public and the news media.

Bañares believes that one of them is exposing misconceptions on vaccines and remedying them through correcting vaccine information.

"Debunking vaccine myths and correcting false information is paramount to achieve herd immunity," Dr. Bañares said.

As Filipinos are excessively sharing information and content on various online platforms, the Department of Health (DOH) [launched](#) the #ChecktheFAQs last April to present trustworthy and credible vaccine information to Filipinos.

Fear as a driving force

The Philippines has recorded a number of 2,666,562 COVID-19 cases last October 10, with new cases spiking up at 12,112 and deaths at 39,624.

The fear of infection is perhaps one of the reasons why Filipinos say yes -- or no -- to vaccination. Aside from protecting their immune systems and decreasing their risks of hospitalization and extreme symptoms, vaccination also allows people to continue their work and be permitted to establishments and other offices.

As a food and beverage business owner, Thea Alvarez commits herself to be vaccinated and to be completely safe from the harmful virus. She goes out of Montalban, her birth city, to collect stock and inventory materials from the National Capital Region (NCR).

Thea chose to protect her health against the virus through vaccination regardless of the brands. With her experience of regularly traveling from work to home, as well as residing with a toddler, Thea guarantees that she will go home safely every time.

“For someone who always goes out and lives with a toddler at home, any [vaccine] brand will do as long as I will get home safely,” she said in Filipino.

But aside from having an invisible shield to keep the virus off her body, Thea’s observations also prompted her to be inoculated. There may be no glimpse of fear in her responses, but her awareness of COVID-19 cases and her great concern to keep herself and her home safe are the possible reasons that interested her to be vaccinated.

“I personally encourage people to have their vaccine. Because I have encountered two [COVID-19] cases, and that they were tested positive. But since they got their vaccine, their symptoms weren’t [that] severe.” Thea’s direct observation of these events may or may not have frightened her but still and all, these remarks confirm that people have contrasting factors before they arrive at that go or no-go decision.

There are conflicting grounds on why Filipinos cower from vaccination. In many instances, the vaccine’s aftereffects are what intimidates them, for this can give rise to certain symptoms. The Food and Drug Administration has summarized a [report](#) of suspected adverse reactions to COVID-19 vaccines. This includes fever, chills, body pain, and headache, among others.

These symptoms can also be worsened depending on one’s health conditions. More often than not, hospitalization is what comes next when unfavorable effects are observed. Hospital treatment and its charge will then be another load that vaccine doubters will have to carry. As the pandemic has already frustrated the financial concerns of households, additional health expenses will torment them even more.

“Filipino mentality regarding diseases is driven by fear, may it be hypertension, diabetes, [or] cancer. They are concerned about the financial implications of the disease. They’d rather not be a burden to their families than face the problem,” said Dr. Bañares.

Filipinos’ sentimentalism can perhaps be used to persuade them to take action or decide not just for themselves, but also for the people they care about. This is one of the many suggestions Dr. Bañares recommends on ways to approach and encourage Filipinos to consider vaccination.

“We must appeal to the public’s emotions to get them vaccinated. If not for themselves, [at least they could] do it for their loved ones who are at risk of dying from the disease,” Dr. Bañares suggests, calling attention to COVID-19 being a ‘communicable disease and a public issue’ that exponentially affects people.

Added reasons as to why the fear of vaccination still lurks among Filipinos is the vaccine insufficiency, wherein it [won't be enough](#) for the population to be vaccinated. On top of that, the Dengvaxia controversy is a major contribution that has been imprinted in the minds of Filipinos, with three deaths of children linked to the said disease. Thus, plummeting Filipinos' trust in vaccines went down to [32% in a 2018](#) study by the World Health Organization (WHO). It has further decreased from [surveys](#) by the Social Weather Stations from late 2020 to early 2021, indicating the [fear of side effects and efficacy accuracy](#).

Reaching herd immunity

Dr. Bañares has a confident claim that vaccination is a way out of the long-lasting health crisis.

“Vaccinations should be strictly implemented for those who do not have any contraindications to getting them. To end the pandemic, vaccination is key.” But despite the precarious vaccine supply during the past months, the country is now gradually accepting vaccine donations from different countries.

In the mid-week of September, according to the [National Task Force \(NTF\) Against COVID-19](#), the country received the highest weekly delivery of vaccines since February this year with a total of 64,942,000 vaccine doses. The NTF also [announced](#) that the United States also completed its delivery of 1.8 million Pfizer vaccine doses last October 11.

Based on the latest [data](#) from DOH as of October 11, 50,066,590 doses were administered with more than 26 million individuals having their first dose, while more than 23 million are inoculated for their single and second dose.

This signifies that there is a firmer schedule for the arrival of vaccines and a faster vaccine deployment. With this, Dr. Bañares proposes a plan to somehow reach herd immunity.

“Aside from faster vaccine rollout, we should focus on vaccinating regions with the highest number of active cases. With this strategy, we can have some sort of ‘localized’ herd immunity. If we control COVID-19 hotspots, we can minimize the transmission within a certain area at risk, and limit the spread to nearby regions,” Dr. Bañares affirmed.

The concept of localizing herd immunity in cities that has the most cases is recognized by the government. The NTF Against Covid-19 chief Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr. [said](#) last September that there is a target number of vaccinating residents in NCR, which is 85% of NCR's population.

In addition, to reach the supposed herd immunity, the national government has planned to vaccinate the general public and children aged 12 to 17 years old with comorbidities. Malacanang [announced](#) that they will begin the tentative rollout of vaccinating these individuals starting October 15.

On the other hand, a [press release](#) by the DOH last September said that the Department has plans to use booster doses but will only do so if additional protection is evident. The health organization has also based its studies on 12 countries that have administered booster shots.

Children may have strong immune systems compared to adults and senior citizens. But like the former, Dr. Bañares insisted that children can also carry the disease and transmit them. Vaccinating children is also a course of action that can help attain herd immunity.

“Like in any viral disease, children easily acquire respiratory diseases and spread them, since they do not [frequently] practice hygiene [such as] handwashing like adults. Vaccinating minors will be an additional blockade to [the] transmission of infections, thereby decreasing cases and minimizing mutations of variants.”

As children being part of the government’s ‘immunization drive’ against COVID-19, where they are [granted](#) to be vaccinated with the ‘Emergency Use Authorization’ by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), it is possible that the country is on the right route to achieve herd immunity.

Yet, a few individuals have their run-of-the-mill perspective of reaching herd immunity, and it is concerned with Filipinos’ lack of discipline.

Roseann Elpa, a fourth-year communication student at Partido State University in Camarines Sur, is exposed to poverty-stricken communities in their area. They experience twice the suffering of what residents in Luzon have to deal with. These are their poor connectivity and signal, and the scarcity of access to vaccines. Notwithstanding, Roseann believes that the fate of the health crisis is determined by the Filipino people; on whether they will practice self-discipline or not.

“In my opinion, it (herd immunity) cannot be attained [in the first months of 2022]. This is because there are more people getting infected by the COVID-19, and they don’t follow government protocols for they don’t have discipline,” Roseann said in Filipino. Similarly, Thea expressed a usual problem among Filipinos, which is their lack of understanding and following safety protocols.

What should be done?

If the pandemic is an auto racing competition participated by all countries as players, the Philippines is among those who are left behind and need to keep up.

In this time of health emergency, the health sector may be regarded as the heart and the most vital part that will address all health concerns. And if it fails to operate proficiently, everything else will collapse.

Dr. Bañares emphasized the inadequacy of a strong and secure healthcare organization. If there have been well-established plans and a decent healthcare system even before the pandemic, then maybe the country will experience less misfortune.

“We must improve the existing healthcare system; [there should be a] proper compensation to medical health workers for them to stay in the country instead of working abroad; distribution of medical specialties to all areas across the country to prevent congestion in the Metro; quality medical supplies should be provided to protect our front liners; and [an] open dialogue between politicians and the medical society to impart medical expertise and optimize [the] approach to addressing issues in public health,” said the infectious disease specialist.

With all the factors that Dr. Bañares mentioned, it is perceived that healthcare workers do not only need sufficient medical equipment and an organized health strategy to ease their duties, but also enough work pay and allowance.

Last September, DOH [announced](#) that there is a 14.3 billion fund for medical front liners, with active hazard duty pay and a special risk allowance.

However, healthcare workers are still eyeing to work abroad. Diane Dy, a then medical front liner at St. Luke’s Medical Center in Quezon City and is now a staff nurse at Charing Cross Hospital in Hammersmith, London, decided to work and settle abroad for its ‘better compensation’. According to Diane, there is also a ‘lack of protection and compensation from the government’.

“In my opinion, at times like this, the government should give more priority to healthcare,” the healthcare worker said.

Diane moved to the United Kingdom with her colleagues last December 2020. The process of their departure took them seven months before they get to be deployed.

Meanwhile, Thea was vehement to call for a more systematized process of vaccination in Montalban. She reached thousands of Filipinos in her Facebook post last August that had more than three thousand shares. After three months of waiting for a text from Montalban’s vaccination program regarding her vaccination schedule, she tried to register in other nearby areas including Marikina City.

“I am a busy person. I tried to register from our local vaccination website in Montalban but after almost three months, they haven’t contacted me or even post my name on their Facebook page regarding my schedule,” Thea said.

According to her, Marikina’s vaccination program is convenient and safe, as the officials have contacted her the day after she registered, and she even received a free breakfast while waiting for her turn.

Thea was able to have her first dose in Marikina in less than two hours.

Apart from these complications, it is with confidence to say that the country may take a while in reaching herd immunity, but one important takeaway from the infectious disease specialist is that ‘vaccination is key’.

As Dr. Bañares said, “I think we can achieve herd immunity since there are already vaccines available; the more pressing question is when.”

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