

DOH priority: other deadly diseases

BY ROMMEL C. LONTAYAO REPORTER

MUCH of the world's health authorities' attention is caught today by a newly-discovered disease that has affected 18 countries and caused the death of 19 people so far.

The World Health Organization (WHO) continues to monitor the swine flu, now called influenza A(H1N1), especially in North America and other parts of Europe.

Still, the underlying fact is that millions of people die of some other kind of disease year in and year out.

In the latest WHO Global Burden of Disease report, the leading causes of death worldwide are ischaemic heart diseases, cerebrovascular diseases, lower respiratory infections, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and diarrheal diseases.

Around 7.2 million people died of ischaemic heart diseases in 2004 while diseases affecting the brain's bold vessels claimed 5.7 million lives.

Lower respiratory infections accounted for 4.2 million deaths in that year and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease some three mil-

lion deaths.

Other diseases that caused the most number of deaths are diarrheal diseases (2.2 million); HIV/AIDS (two million); tuberculosis (1.5 million); and trachea, bronchus, and lung cancers (1.3 million).

In the Philippines, latest data from the Department of Health (DOH) also reveal that heart diseases account for the most number of deaths, as 70,861 died of the disease in 2004.

The other leading causes of death in the country are vascular system diseases (51,680), malignant neoplasm (40,524), pneumonia (32,098), and tuberculosis (25,870).

These diseases are consistently listed in the leading causes of death in the Philippines for the past several years.

As for the recently discovered disease, there were no confirmed

cases of influenza A(H1N1) infection in humans in the country, yet Philippine health authorities are up to their feet in preventing any possible outbreak of the disease.

The government around P90 million for the purchase of anti-viral drugs and personal protective equipment against A(H1N1).

As of noon Friday, there were 898 officially reported cases of influenza A(H1N1) infection, including 19 deaths that all came from Mexico.

It also has the most number of reported cases with 506 while the United States has 226. Other countries also reported confirmed cases: Austria (1), Canada (85), China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (1), Costa Rica (1), Denmark (1), France (2), Germany (8), Ireland (1), Israel (3), Italy (1), Netherlands (1), New Zealand (4), Republic of Korea (1), Spain (40), Switzerland (1) and the United Kingdom (15).

Last week, the WHO raised the swine influenza pandemic alert level to Phase 5, which means that there is already human-to-human transmission of the virus, causing sustained community outbreaks in a number of countries.

Health officials from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN) are also meeting later this week to discuss the issue on influenza A(H1N1).

According to Dr. Margaret Chan, WHO director-general, health authorities worldwide are focusing on preventing or controlling influenza A(H1N1) because it is a new disease and it is capable of rapid transmission.

"New diseases are, by definition, poorly understood. Influenza viruses are notorious for their rapid mutation and unpredictable behavior," Chan said as she urged all countries to immediately activate their pandemic preparedness plans.

"At this stage, effective and essential measures include heightened surveillance, early detection and treatment of cases, and infection control in all health facilities," she said.

Despite the heightened alert on this one specific disease, the WHO said it is not keeping its eyes off other diseases that affect the most number of people annually.

The international health body said prevention and treatment programs and campaigns are already in place for the common communicable diseases.

Here in the Philippines, the DOH said it regularly initiates programs targeting to lower, if not

eliminate, cases of diseases that affect more Filipinos.

This year, the DOH is set to implement its F1 Foundational Campaign that will highlight priority programs and services geared towards the country's attainment of its Millennium Development Goals targets, including the prevention of chronic diseases and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

In the 61st World Health Assembly, all member states, including the Philippines, endorsed a six-year action plan to tackle non-communicable diseases (NCDs), finally ending the decades of neglect and unjustified omission of chronic diseases in the global health agenda. The goal, as proposed by the WHO, is to reduce the death toll from NCDs by 2 percent yearly until 2015.

For the next two years, the DOH also vowed to raise people's consciousness on the different risk factors for developing NCDs; motivate people to adopt and maintain a healthy lifestyle through counseling and treatment intervention programs; and encourage politicians, media and other stakeholders to provide Filipinos with environments supportive of healthy lifestyle.

WITH REPORTS FROM APRILMAAN MAGAT AND ALVIN EVANGELIO