

**KEYNOTE SPEECH OF SECRETARY FRANCISCO T. DUQUE III, MD, MSc.  
DURING THE 1<sup>ST</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORY OF  
MEDICINE IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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GREETINGS (VIPs)

International and local speakers, medical historians, archivists and librarians, fellow doctors, other guests, ladies and gentlemen...a pleasant morning to each and everyone.

Thank you very much for honoring me with this invitation to be your Keynote Speaker in the *1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on the History of Medicine in the Philippines*. I do not claim to be an expert on this subject. I do not have a PhD in Medical History. But I am a product of this medical institution, along with my father, both wanting to contribute to its remarkable history with our shared vision of sculpting a responsive and equitable healthcare system for our people.

In fact, today, as I address our international panel of experts here, there is this sense of self-deprecating humor... and a bit of shame, even...that they should know Philippine Medicine with more historical and chronological depth. How can they have more knowledge? How can they be more interested? How can they outwit the Filipino doctor...and the leader of the Philippine health sector in having a grasp of the rich human texture of our medical history? Now, that is both a puzzle and a tragedy.

The study of Philippine Medicine has admittedly been a forlorn field, left to the deep and dark archives of forgotten centuries. Because we are a country colonized longest by Spaniards, influenced heavily by Americans and oppressed by the Japanese, then it became a hard struggle for us as a people to truly define and own a unique identity. Even Philippine Medicine lacks emphasis for its own heritage and history. There is very little reflection on our past, whether recent or distant. And because of this collective failure to preserve and ponder on the legacy of Medicine in the Philippines, then we lose the opportunity for a truly valuable learning process by which we can offer more relevant cure, better relief and more soothing comfort to every poor and sick Filipino patient.

I could say very honestly that this lack of memory is now the biggest handicap of the medical profession --- a pathological problem in need of urgent treatment and change. Because we do not venerate the past, then we are doomed to repeat its deadly mistakes, make bigger ones and not improve our health history.

Look at where our medical students draw their science for the practice of medicine in our local communities to this day! Look at the volumes of foreign textbooks shoved to

them! And consider how training in our medical profession today still operates a great deal on Western-defined concepts, medical procedures, ethics and professional virtues. Because they lack role models, our young practitioners today easily migrate out of the country and leave... stripped of conscience... reasoning out that theirs is a valid and acceptable weakness. There are no heroes to teach them about pride and nationalism...about the unique history and dignity of being a doctor addressing the bigger social ills of their own country. Heroes fall dead and silent in the annals of Philippine Medicine. Meanwhile, the clamor to be served by doctors ...to be reached with life-saving medicines is thunderous and alive in our poorest rural areas.

Where are the pieces of the puzzle of our medical history? Where is the genuine perspective which lays bare that we have not solved the basic health problems affecting our poor for centuries and decades --- the twin evils of TB and malaria, pneumonia and diarrhea and other diseases which still effectively kill them today? Where is our attentiveness to what history has to say and our bravery to shape it?

In many ways, it is really difficult to dig events from the past four centuries and mine the vast field of our medical history for their lessons and mistakes...for their trials and triumphs. But we cannot strictly lock in Medicine to the present. We draw from the past multiple perspectives...not one but many answers...and multiple layers not afforded to us by hard science. And each time we find a different story in the rise and fall of epidemics, the emergence of preventive measures and cures, changing contexts, and the dynamic behaviors of populations and patients. We are intrigued by the social phenomenon of disease. World Wars, changes in government, political upheavals and economic depression have, for example, led to some of history's worse epidemics and the breakdown of health systems. We connect with historical models in remote time zones because they have practical benefits in solving today's most pressing problems.

But above all, we are inspired and are fascinated by medical heroes --- individuals who share with us the humanity of the medical profession but who possess the blood, the guts and the imagination to stir change. Really, nothing could be more engaging than medical champions who are as human and fallible as any of us but who, in many ways, challenged us to look hard upon ourselves... to criticize... to express and to develop ourselves even more because of the medical miracles they performed. Their lives and examples should be our lure to engage the future generations to the brave and noble profession of medicine.

The long history of the University of Sto. Tomas as the first medical university in the country, brims over with towering medical heroes. Of course, Dr. Jose Rizal --- ophthalmologist, teacher, poet, novelist, artist, linguist, philanthropist, lover and national hero reigns high and mighty as UST's finest human masterpiece. I propose that when introducing Philippine Medical History to our young doctors, you begin by telling his story. It is perfect proof of every Filipino doctor's potential for superhuman love, brilliance and heroism.

As for me, it was the legacy of my father, the late Francisco Quimson Duque Jr., a fine surgeon, former Secretary of Health during the term of then President Diosdado Macapagal, who gave me a profound respect for and a deep consciousness of our own history. I am indeed fortunate to have had a leading, living and breathing example.

History does repeat itself in some ways. But because lessons have already been learned, then you have no excuse not to do better. My father's term reeled with the dangerous El Tor Cholera epidemic, which began in Southeast Asia in 1961. With swift action and pounding authority, he was credited for having stopped the outbreak within a year limiting the deaths in the close to 40 provinces it has ravaged.

We have had about 16 health emergencies in the past year and this is truly unprecedented. The mercury spills in Makati and St. Andrew's School in Quezon City as well as the chemical spill in Bulacan rudely burst onto the scene, entirely new, and almost caught us grappling in the health sector. Then there was the massive oil spill in Guimaras, claimed to be the worst to hit our shores. Also, there was the appalling landslide in Guinsaugon, Leyte burying a whole barangay and more than 1,500 lives within a few seconds. And the year did not end, of course, without the Philippines running into 2 super typhoons hitting parts of Visayas and Luzon. While all of these disasters hurled at me and my people at DOH, I had my father's good sense and agility in mind. And after enduring a year thick with disasters, I realized that I beat my old man 16 to 1.

But no one can defeat my father's lofty goal of providing universal health care for all Filipinos through social health insurance. He was truly ahead of his time and was his generation's leading proponent of free medical care for the poor. And his vision in fact, paved the way for a milestone in Philippine healthcare ---the Medicare Act of 1969 which was the forerunner of the National Health Insurance Act of 1995. On hindsight, I presume history bridged the decades between us as I now fight his battle and carry his torch for Philhealth to become the retribution against our deep social inequities and the redeemer of the health of every poor Filipino.

In closing, allow me to express my sincerest thanks to the University of Sto. Tomas for this distinctive opportunity to finally unlock the door of our country's medical history. Let us all take heed of what it says. Let us comprehend on its untapped wealth of meanings. And let us be fearless in improving it.

Thank you and good morning.