Misinformation, monopoly in PCVs may lead to another dengvaxia scare

Advocates cautioned against another issue similar to the dengvaxia scare of a few years back by pursuing the fight against misinformation, insisting on transparency in vaccine procurement, and avoiding a monopoly for pneumococcal conjugate vaccines (PCVs).

In a recent forum dubbed, “The Need for Transparency and Truthfulness in Public Health: Amid Misinformation and Fake News,” Medicine Transparency Alliance (MeTA) chairman and former Bulacan Governor Obet Pagdangasan called for good governance and transparency, particularly in the procurement of PCVs to avoid another problem similar to what happened a few years ago with the dengvaxia issue.

“We should have learned our lesson and not allow another dengvaxia scare to happen with pneumonia vaccines,” Pagdangasan stressed. “Global experts like the WHO have already reported that the available PCVs in the market are comparable in impact so we must make sure that the government procures them through an open, competitive bidding process,” he added.

Last March, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has found probable cause to indict former Health Secretary Janette Garin and several others for reckless imprudence resulting in homicide in connection with the deaths of eight children allegedly due to the Dengvaxia vaccine.

“Back in 2017, when the vaccine scare was at its peak, misinformation had caused confidence in vaccines to plummet from a 2015 high of 93%, to an abysmal 32% in 2018,” Dr. Luis Bravo, Executive Director of the Philippine Foundation for Vaccination (PFV), revealed, stressing that the dengvaxia scare was brought about mainly by misinformation.

“We should not let another vaccine scare happen again, especially for pneumonia vaccines because pneumonia is the forgotten killer of children,” Bravo said.

“As many as 39 Filipino children, or the equivalent of an entire classroom – die every day due to pneumonia, making it the leading cause of death for kids under the age of five. The Philippines is included in the top 15 countries in terms of pneumonia deaths, and those 15 countries are responsible for 75% of all deaths from pneumonia,” Dr. Bravo said.

Niña Corpus-Rodriguez, parent advocate and popular media personality stressed the need to avoid another vaccine scare due to misinformation. “There is so much misinformation in the media right now, and we must all be careful in sorting out the truth from fake news,” Rodrigues said.

When asked about news reports circulating that the pneumococcal vaccine PCV10 was being touted as a weaker vaccine than PCV13, as reported by Sen. Mike Defensor as well as Representative and former health secretary Janette Garin, Dr. Bravo answered, “Also ang baebae nila? Our basis should be the World Health Organization who, in a more recent study, stated that PCV13 and PCV10 are comparable in performance and impact, especially if you are considering nations where there are so many deaths from pneumonia like the Philippines.”

The World Health Organization (WHO) put out a position paper in 2017 which states that there is present insufficient evidence of a difference in the net impact of the PCV10 AND PCV13 on overall disease burden. In other words, both PCVs available in the market have comparable effectiveness in protecting children from overall pneumococcal disease. The WHO reiterated this stand in 2019.

The International Vaccine Access Center (IVAC) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) also reported on the comparability of PCV10 and PCV13 in their own studies.

“Therefore, saying that one vaccine is weaker than the other is misleading and contributes only to misinformation,” Dr. Bravo noted. “We need to rely on what independent global experts say because it is our responsibility as pediatricians, to be updated with the most relevant, and most updated information.”

Cautioning people on believing claims based on the epidemiology of other countries, Bravo said, “Hindi po pare pareho ang merong mikrobobyo sa Pilipinas, kaya sa nasa lalabing Amerika, Europa, at China, Hindi po ka ang ginawa sa ibang bansa, dapat ganon na rin dito.” Dr. Bravo also said that that serotypes present in other countries are not necessarily those that are prevalent here in the Philippines.

Pagdangasan also noted that an open and competitive bidding in vaccines can help the Philippine government to vaccinate more people and use the savings for pneumonia treatments. “Dapat may transparency, dahil kung walang transparency ay makaconsumer ng isang supplier lang,” Pagdangasan noted. “Pig may competition, you bring down the cost of medicine, and you make it available. Lower the cost, mas marunong kang mabili at mas malaki kang magsuro.”

“With the huge budget of P4.9 billion set aside for vaccines, of which 70% has been committed to PCVs, it is critical to prevent misinformation from compromising the sanctity of the contract and the purpose to which it serves,” Pagdangasan claimed.

Pagdangasan also stressed that a truly open and competitive bid would allow proper examination of the two vaccines and promote better transparency. “The important consideration now is how we can provide the greatest protection to the most Filipinos,” Pagdangasan stated. “The government can save close to a billion pesos annually with PCV10 savings that can be used to save even more Filipino lives.

“Considering the comparable efficacy of the two vaccines based on the studies of global experts, as well as the cost implications, the decision to choose which vaccine is best for the nation should be made carefully,” said Pagdangasan.