Responding to an outbreak

A national dengue alert was declared over two weeks ago. I was worried when it was first reported that there was a 236 percent increase in the number of cases this year when compared to the same period last year. The alarming numbers kept coming in over the days that followed: 33 barangays in Bicol placed on alert, a 231 percent increase in cases in Zamboanga Del Sur, and 456 dead already.

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Dengue is not an unfamiliar disease. It is considered endemic to the Philippines, which ranks fourth in Southeast Asia in terms of the number of people infected by the dengue virus every year. Those who survive — mortality rate was pegged at 0.44 percent in 2017 — gain immunity to that particular strain of dengue. Unfortunately, there are four strains of dengue and a person who has already been infected once is at greater risk of developing deadly complications if they are infected again. According to the latest information from the Department of Health (DoH), the strain currently dominant in the Philippines is Serotype 3, which is associated with the usual identifiable symptoms of high fever, headache, muscle pain, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea and rashes.

It is monsoon season and we know to brace for common illnesses associated with the season: the flu, leptospirosis and dengue. I am at a loss as to why the staggering numbers of dengue incidences are manifesting this year, but for the purposes of containing the outbreak, we don’t really need to know why. Ultimately, preventing dengue is a matter of controlling the carriers of the disease — those pesky mosquitos!

The good news is that research is being undertaken elsewhere in the world to permanently control mosquito populations. Until then, we all just need to brush up on the precautionary practices we were all taught as children, way back when malaria was more the concern.

Clean your surroundings and make sure that no water sits stagnant. Wear insect repellent and cover up so that you don’t get bitten during the day — dengue mosquitos are day-biting mosquitos.

Beyond that, all we can do is be aware of the symptoms (mentioned earlier), which appear anywhere from two to seven days after a person is bitten. If you experience any symptoms, get yourself to the nearest health facility and get your blood tested. Even though our healthcare system is still being fixed (next week the Senate is set to launch an investigation into the mess with the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation), I have confidence that they nonetheless stand ready to combat this deadly disease as best they can.