Clearing a constipated medicine distribution system

IN February 2019, in another win for social justice, President Duterte signed Republic Act 11223 or the Universal Health Care Act. The law—which we were fortunate to have coauthored and cosponsored in the Senate with our friends Sens. JV Ejercito (the principal champion of this measure) and Ralph Recto, with Quezon Rep. Helen Tan as sponsor in the House—not only ensured universal coverage for all Filipinos but also expanded the benefits and health services available to them, as well. Among the substantial reforms under the UHC law would be free basic checkups and laboratory tests—which will definitely bring a sigh of relief to many as studies show that 6 out of 10 Filipinos pass on without seeing a doctor.

With the increase and expansion of PhilHealth coverage, the funding requirement to fully implement the UHC for the first year alone was estimated to be a whopping P257 billion. In fact, immediately after the May 2019 elections, the Senate rolled up its sleeves to pass the law increasing the tobacco excise tax, and imposing new taxes on heated tobacco products and vapor products to augment the funding needed for the UHC law’s implementation.

That is why the recent Commission on Audit report detailing how the Department of Health (DOH) has accumulated drugs and medicines amounting to more than P18 billion in its warehouses—with a portion nearing their expiry date—is utterly disheartening. What’s worse is that the same COA report found out that more than P30 million worth of drugs and medicines were already expired—an unconscionable waste of taxpayer’s money.

The COA report hits close to home for many, but most especially for those who are struggling with purchasing medicines. Many Filipinos are said to under-medicate because they could not afford the required dosage. Such stories are not new—but that only makes the news of any wastage of drugs and medicines a veritable slap in the face of millions of Filipinos.

One of the reasons COA cited that led to the overstock and expiration of drugs and medicines was the DOH’s inefficient procurement planning and non-monitoring of inventories. And while the DOH stated that it is currently working on the immediate distribution of the drugs and medicines still in their inventory, there is still a need to allay the concerns of many that the department is not being fiscally responsible with the finite resources allocated to them.
This is why we filed Senate Resolution 53 calling for an investigation on this matter to determine where the bottlenecks of medicine distribution are and how such an issue should be addressed.

Another cause for alarm is the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report published last month that revealed that the Philippines—among Southeast Asian countries—has the highest incidence of falsified medicines. As stated in the report, of the total number of incidents of counterfeiting and illegal distribution of pharmaceutical products from 2013 to 2017, the country sits on top, followed by Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam.

Simply put, Filipinos are fighting a war for much-needed medicines on many fronts: 1) in terms of high and rising costs; and 2) the seeming surge of counterfeit pharmaceutical products that could have low potency, at best, or highly risky, at worst. This only underscores why the DOH cannot afford to be inefficient with its inventory—and why such wastage should not be tolerated.

With the upcoming implementation of the UHC Act, the department needs to institute deep reforms, ramp up all its efforts to provide health-care services to every Filipino, and clear up all blockages in our apparently “constipated” medicine distribution system. This perennial problem with undistributed expired drugs will certainly be a major point of interest in the upcoming Senate hearings on the proposed 2020 national budget of the agency.