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DOH, PPS: A SMOKE-FREE PHILIPPINES LESSENS COVID-19 RISK, TOBACCO USE WEAKENS LUNGS AND IMMUNE SYSTEM

Press Release | 8 November 2020

The Department of Health (DOH), together with the Philippine Pediatric Society (PPS), rallied behind tobacco cessation to further protect the public from the spread of COVID-19.

Joining Usec. Maria Rosario Singh-Vergeire during the November 4 media forum was Dr. Rizalina Racquel H. Gonzalez, chair of the PPS Tobacco Control Advocacy Group who talked about the risks of both cigarette and vape smoking, and how these can possibly spread the COVID-19 virus.

According to Usec. Singh-Vergeire, ceasing tobacco use has always been part of the campaigns of the DOH and has been one of its health priorities due to the long-term adverse effects of smoking, not only to smokers, but on the people around them and the environment.

“It has been challenging to push for total tobacco cessation among the public, but we are not giving up. This is why it is part of the department’s health priorities that are being championed by the Health Promotion Bureau,” said Usec. Singh-Vergeire.

Meanwhile, Dr. Gonzalez revealed a startling connection between cigarette or vape smoking and COVID-19, which can cause critical hospitalization or even death.

“Smoking is associated with increased severity of disease and death in hospitalized COVID-19 patients,” Gonzalez emphasized. “Given the well-established harms associated with tobacco use and second-hand smoke exposure, the WHO (World Health Organization) recommends that tobacco users stop using tobacco.”

Dr. Gonzalez also pointed out that another way that tobacco use increases the risk and spread of COVID-19 is through the hand-to-mouth gesture of puffing a cigarette or vape, which is counterintuitive to public medical advice advising people not to touch their faces.

As tobacco use is often a social activity, according to Dr. Gonzalez, it also opens an opportunity for crowding which is also counterintuitive to another anti-COVID-19 preventive measure: physical distancing. Using waterpipe or shisha also entails sharing the same pipe, which can spread viruses from person to person.

Moreover, as the PPS chair elaborated, the effects of coronavirus can be worse for people who use tobacco as it leads to disease and disability, harming nearly every body organ including the lungs.

As the lungs are damaged by tobacco use, the effects of coronavirus can be worse, said Dr. Gonzalez. She also added that tobacco use affects the immune system, hence making smokers less able to fight off infections.

Considering these risks, Dr. Gonzalez also asked for stronger support for policies against tobacco use. She urged, “So, we urge this call, we have been using this call, pre-COVID to let’s help push our tobacco-free laws to have a smoke-free Philippines.”

Philippine Laws against Smoking and Vaping include the following which require immediate compliance: Executive Order (EO) No. 26, series of 2017 which bans smoking in enclosed public spaces and the sale of cigarettes within 100 meters from a school; EO 106, series of 2020 which updated EO 26 to include ban on manufacture and sale of e-cigarettes to minors; the Republic Act (RA) 11346 of 2019, raising the excise tax on cigarettes by P45 per pack with an incremental increase of P5 per year for four years, reaching a total of P60 by 2023 where 50% of tax is for health care; and lastly, the RA 11467 of 2020 which is raising the excise tax on e-liquids and age of access to 21 years old.

Usec. Singh-Vergeire supported Dr. Gonzalez’s pronouncement, saying that tobacco cessation education is important especially during a pandemic as it helps boost the knowledge of the public, especially smokers, on how to take care of their own health of the person next to them.

“Ito ay proof na may magagawa ang bawat isa sa atin upang makaiwas at maging mas malakas laban sa sakit,” stressed Usec. Singh-Vergeire.