

Supporting leukemia patients in the Philippines: a call to action

Dalmacito A. Cordero Jr 

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To the editor,
Leukemia is a cancer of the white blood cells. It develops in the bone marrow and spreads into the blood and other organs. The types of leukemia are grouped by how rapidly the disease develops (acute vs chronic leukemia) and by the type of blood cell involved (lymphocytic and myeloid leukemia).¹ In 2020, leukemia accounted for approximately 2.5% and 3.1% of all new cancer incidence and mortality worldwide. The data translate to 474,519 new cases that were reported in the same year.² In the Philippines, leukemia is among the top five killer cancers and is considered a “silent killer.” In 2015, around 4270 new cases were diagnosed for the year, with 3386 deaths.³ These cases rose to more than 5795, with 4370 deaths in 2020, and had increased to 7026, with 5416 deaths in 2022, as reported by the International Agency for Research on Cancer.⁴ Around 14 Filipino children are diagnosed with cancer daily, and more than half of those with leukemia have acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL).

With the increasing cases of leukemia in the Philippines, the government implemented several programs to raise awareness of different blood-related disorders affecting Filipinos, one of which is Proclamation No. 1833, which proclaims September as Blood Diseases Month. Throughout this month, the government utilizes various social media platforms to disseminate vital information regarding blood matters, including diseases, causes, symptoms, prevention, and proper nutrition. Similarly, the Department of Health (DOH) regularly observes World Leukemia Awareness Month to raise awareness regarding blood diseases. The Philippine Blood Disease and Transfusion Center Act was also enacted last March 2024. In this act, the government will construct, establish, operate, and maintain a specialty hospital, with at least 250-bed capacity, which shall offer comprehensive care for patients with blood diseases; establish and operate a blood

transfusion center and a state-of-the-art hematology laboratory; collect blood from qualified voluntary blood donors, and process whole blood into blood components; ensure the safety, as well as the adequate supply, of blood and blood products delivered to hospitals and other health facilities; promote, encourage, and engage in medical and scientific research on the prevention and treatment of blood diseases⁵; among others.

There needs to be more than these government initiatives to address the health problem. One of the main concerns of the locals is the expensive treatment, management, and care of leukemia patients. The entire course of the chemotherapy, for example, will cost the patient \$6663.39 (Php 338,500.40). PhilHealth, a government-owned and controlled corporation, can only assist with a total of US\$ 573.22 (Php 29,120.00) allowable benefit (Php 7280 × 4 average admissions for chemotherapy).⁶ PhilHealth adjusted the assistance called Z Benefits package to children with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) from P210,000.00 to PhP380,000.00 while the DOH supplies chemotherapeutic drugs.⁷ However, this assistance is for children with ALL; what about the help for adolescents and older people? It is important to note that the vast PhilHealth fund came from mandatory deductions from the salary of every local worker. Recently, PhilHealth was involved with controversy with its move to transfer its “unused and excess” budget of Php89.9 billion to the Bureau of the Treasury.⁸ Many Filipinos do not know why the corporation budget is not fully utilized. It must have been used to increase the support for leukemia patients and other dreaded diseases.

It is, therefore, a must to increase the financial support for leukemia in the country. In this way, it can boost early screening, detection procedures, prevention, treatment, and care. PhilHealth claimed that when its Z Benefits for ALL was executed, the patient outcomes had improved:

Correspondence to:
Dalmacito A. Cordero Jr
Department of Theology
and Religious Education,
De La Salle University,
1004 Taft Avenue, Manila,
Philippines
dalmacito.cordero@dlsu.edu.ph

late diagnosis was reduced from 70% to 30%; treatment abandonment rate decreased from 80% to 10% up to 20%; and overall survival rate improved to 78% from 16% up to 20%.⁹ The economic burden of leukemia is indeed onerous to carry by Filipino patients and their families. It is time for the government to render its all-out support, not to select patients' age only but to everyone who needs it.

Declaration

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Not applicable.

Consent for publication
Not applicable.


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Dalmacito A. Cordero Jr: Conceptualization; Data curation, Methodology; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

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ORCID iD
Dalmacito A. Cordero Jr  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8062-1242>

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