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## Dengvaxia politicized from the start

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**W**hile the controversy over the Dengvaxia vaccine continues to rage, the Department of Health (DOH) reported there are now 10,980 dengue cases recorded nationwide as of yesterday's official count. Of this total, reckoned from day one of this year up to end of February last Wednesday, 51 dengue-stricken patients died already.

Obviously not to alarm the public, the DOH cited the present total number of dengue cases was 41.38 percent lower compared to the same period last year. Admitted in various hospitals around the country in the first two months of this year, the total figure is way below last year's 18,731 dengue cases reported to the DOH.

From a review of the DOH, most of the dengue cases were recorded in areas where the mass Dengvaxia vaccination program were implemented from April 2016 until this was halted in December last year.

So more likely than not, there will be new claims of alleged Dengvaxia-related deaths that would come out soon.

As of last Wednesday when we had our weekly *Kapitan sa Manila Bay* with Health Secretary Dr. Francisco Duque as featured guest, 40 Dengvaxia-related deaths, he told us, were submitted for investigation. If it is any consolation, Duque assured the public these statistics of the Dengvaxia vaccine case fatality ratio continues to be less than one percent of the top killer diseases in the Philippines.

Duque explained these deaths can't be attributed yet as directly caused by the vaccine. He clarified the fatalities may have had other diseases such as acute leukemia, systemic lupus, encephalitis, severe typhoid fever and other pre-existing conditions.

"It just happened that most of them were given Dengvaxia vaccine," Duque stressed, "I don't want to say that the fatality was less therefore we can disregard the effect of the vaccine. Even a single life that is lost is still a big tragedy."

Duque lamented the Dengvaxia scandal that has been rocking the DOH has sent shock waves to the country's entire public health system. Appointed for the second time as Health Secretary, Duque recalls with deep concern that the DOH has never in its 117-year history been confronted with a mass vaccination program that has gone awry and may even cause deaths.

An epidemiology specialist, Duque shared with us in great detail how the DOH will address the horrors of Dengvaxia to some 837,000 public school children administered with Sanofi's anti-dengue vaccine. During our news forum we hold at *Café Adriatico* in Remedios Circle in Malate, Duque conceded to such dire prospects of having to watch for the next five years close to a million young children who were administered with Dengvaxia.

Duque earlier tapped the help of the University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital to conduct

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RE VACCINATION

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## DENGVAXIA POLITICIZED FROM THE START

the medical review of the 40 cases of alleged Dengvaxia-related deaths. Duque disclosed he has yet to get the reply of the World Health Organization (WHO) on independent forensic experts to help investigate the Dengvaxia cases.

The Dengvaxia controversy erupted a month after Duque's re-assumption of the post on Nov. 6, 2017. He first served as Health Secretary of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Before the end of Mrs. Arroyo's second term in office in 2010, Duque was appointed to a fixed term as chairman of the Civil Service Commission.

When President Rodrigo Duterte assumed office at Malacañang in June 2016, Duque was first named as board chairman of the Government Service Insurance System.

He was appointed again to head the DOH after former Health secretary Paulyn Ubial's confirmation was voted down by the Commission on Appointments.

While Duque was barely back at the helm of the DOH, Sanofi Pasteur issued an advisory on Nov. 29 last year that Dengvaxia should not be given to people who have not had dengue before. It was only then Duque got to know the DOH was implementing again its Dengvaxia immunization program. He immediately ordered to stop it after the French pharmaceutical company belatedly admitted their Dengvaxia vaccine has yet to hurdle the last and final testing stage.

At the resumption of the House public hearing on the Dengvaxia controversy, Public Attorney's Office (PAO) chief Persida Acosta loosely mentioned in her usual high-pitched voice that even Duque continued with the Dengvaxia program. The PAO chief was invited to the House hearing following refusal of her agency to share with the DOH medical review the forensic results of 14 alleged Dengvaxia-related deaths involving public schoolchildren aged nine years and above.

Aside from the probe of the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee chaired by Sen. Richard Gordon, a separate congressional inquiry is also being conducted on the Dengvaxia controversy by the House committee on good government chaired by Surigao del Sur Rep. Johnny Pimentel.

Impassioned by the cause she is taking up for the parents and families of the dead children, Acosta reiterated PAO's intention to file administrative and criminal cases against all government officials who may be found accountable and liable for the questionable procurement and implementation of the Dengvaxia immunization program.

In her usual "combative" stance, the feisty PAO chief vowed to run after government officials wherever evidence leads them - whether they are from the previous administration of former President Benigno "P-Noy" Aquino III or of the present Duterte administration.

But Acosta might have spoken too soon. During a TV interview, the chairman of House committee on good government virtually cleared P-Noy already from any liability and accountability for the P3.4-billion procurement of the Dengvaxia vaccines administered one month before the May 2016 national elections to Filipino children who became lab rats for Sanofi's anti-dengue formula.

This was a day after P-Noy complained at the last House hearing of the Dengvaxia controversy that it was being "politicized" by people wanting to get back at his former administration. Look who's talking? Who used Dengvaxia for politics in the first place?