

- Vaccination

## Protect elderly against the 'twindemic' –experts

BusinessMirror · 14 Oct 2021 · B7 · By Rory Visco

The country can barely cope with the existing Covid-19 pandemic. However, the battle against this disease is slowly gaining traction thanks to the Covid-19 vaccines. However, the medical community warned of another disease where the elderly population, already most vulnerable to Covid-19, is seen to be most susceptible as well— influenza. In the Philippines, the elderly population is reportedly growing. According to Dr. Eduardo Poblete, president of the Philippine College of Geriatric Medicine, there were only about 4.5 million senior citizens in the country back in 2000. But this has grown to 7.5 million in 2015.

He added that in 2019, 8.6 percent of the population were already 60 years old and above, and the same age bracket is expected to double to 16.5 percent by year 2050.

The 'twindemic' threat

Influenza-attributable deaths in the Philippines account for 5.09 deaths per 100,000 persons, and it is highest among individuals aged 60 years old and above. Out of 37,000 confirmed deaths in the Philippines due to Covid-19, 56 percent are male, with the 60-69 age group being the most affected, followed by the 70-79-year and 50-59-year bracket. Experts have warned that the elderly, who are unprotected from flu and Covid-19, can also be at risk of a possible coinfection, the most vulnerable to this so-called "twindemic," especially since both can be acquired via respiratory droplets and have similar symptoms. "One disease can already be very burdensome to the elderly, and so the threat of two diseases to which the elderly is vulnerable—Covid-19 and the flu—can be very dangerous to them. It is imperative that we protect the vulnerable, and we have a vaccine we can maximize for that," according to Dr. Poblete during the webinar organized by the Philippine Foundation for Vaccination (PFV), a member of the World Health Organization (WHO) Vaccine Safety Net, in line with the celebration of Elderly Week in the Philippines.

For her part, PFV founder and executive Director Dr. Lulu Bravo supported Dr. Poblete's statements, who said that another way to protect senior citizens from the flu is by having everyone around them be vaccinated against influenza.

"When you give the flu vaccine to the very young and the very old, they actually protect each other. To me that's how it should be. Give them the flu vaccine they need to prevent them from getting hospitalized," Dr. Bravo explained.

Recognizing the vulnerability of elderly citizens to the "twindemic," the Senior Citizens Party-list have beefed up its efforts to ensure that more seniors will be vaccinated against the flu.

Discussing the party-list's best practices on flu immunization, lawyer Charles de Belen, legal and legislative head of the Senior Citizens Party-list, represented in the Congress by Rep. Rodolfo Ordanes, said that only three out of 10 elderly citizens are aware of flu vaccination, while four of 10 know of pneumococcal vaccination.

However, what's troubling, de Belen said, is that 53 percent of those aware are not vaccinated against pneumonia, while 36 percent of those who are aware of flu vaccines are not

vaccinated. This means 19 percent of those aware of pneumonia and flu vaccines are not vaccinated. This leads to 5,000 flu-associated deaths and 57,000 pneumonia-associated deaths.

But what's even more alarming, he said, is that these numbers were all "prepandemic." "This shows how important it is for the elderly to get vaccinated, considering that the existence of Covid-19 has made getting vaccinated against the flu more imperative for the elderly."

So why aren't senior citizens getting vaccinated? he said lack of awareness, vaccine hesitancy, accessibility, complacency and lack of motivation are the reasons given. That is why, according to de Belen, they have proposed policies and programs for the immunization of the elderly.

One is the door-to-door flu and pneumococcal vaccination, where barangay health workers can be tapped in the immunization of the elderly in the safety of their own homes. The group has also rolled out a vaccine education campaign at the grassroots level about vaccine efficacy to help reduce hesitancy. de Belen also added they have implemented an incentive program for vaccinated senior citizens to help encourage others to get vaccinated.

One of their major thrusts is to increase the availability of vaccines to senior citizens through legislation. he said what they are advocating is to expand the coverage of the law to include any Department of health-approved vaccines like tetanus and diphtheria be made available to senior citizens. "We believe that if we make all vaccines available to senior citizens, it will increase their trust on the vaccines and the government to decrease vaccine hesitancy."