

- Public health

# QC govt launches community-based cervical cancer screening program

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The Quezon City government recently launched a community-based cervical cancer screening program as part of the enactment of City Ordinance SP-3285 or the Quezon City Integrated Cancer Control Ordinance (QCICCO) which made the city the first city in the country to establish an integrated cancer control policy.

The local government of Quezon City reiterated that since 2019, the Department of Health (DOH) had already cascaded cancer prevention programs and services to women, their families, and the communities to local government units. In fact, the Quezon City Health Department (QCHD) had already showed that an integrated screen-and-treat model to prevent cervical cancer through the use of high-performance tests such as molecular assay and provision of early treatment services in its health centers proved to be viable and feasible.

The program was launched together with Jhpiego (Johns Hopkins Program for International Education in Gynecology and Obstetrics) Philippines, a nonprofit organization for international health affiliated with Baltimore, USA-based Johns Hopkins University, South Star Drug, and Women Wonders for Health Empowerment Network.

## Laboratory test

By next month, the HPV DNA, which is a laboratory test that screens for high-risk types of the human papillomavirus (HPV) to detect cervical cancer and precancerous changes in the cervix, will be made available to Quezon City residents aged 30 to 49 years old. Other cervical cancer screening programs will be made available to the city's health facilities, including HPV vaccination for girls aged 9 to 14 years old, and visual inspection using acetic acid (VIA) and Pap Smear for women 50 years old and above.

Dr. Karen See, QCHD's Cancer Control Coordinator, said cervical cancer screening has now reached more than 16,000 for 2024, an increase from previous years, perhaps due to the ordinance. At present, screening is being done in the city's 66 health centers, nine lying-in clinics, and nine sundown and social hygiene clinics.

"We saw an increase of the number of women approaching us for screening after the new ordinance was passed. Of the number screened last year, around 237 turned out to be positive. They got scared when they learned they were positive but we're doing our best for them to avail of 'thermal ablation' (used to destroy pre-cancerous cells), which is free in the city, and also free is when they are referred to a hospital for diagnosis and treatment."

## Self-testing kit

Dr. See mentioned that the HPV DNA test kit is a self-testing kit and will be available by middle of this year. For her part, Carole Malenab, Southstar Drug Corporate Affairs Manager for Drugstore Segment, the self-testing kit will be made more accessible not just in the city's barangay health center and Regional Health Units but through select Southstar Drug branches during the program's early stages, and all for free. She added that initially, four

South Star Drug outlets such as in Matalino Street in QC, Robinson's Novaliches, Yuseco in Manila and Shopwise Parañaque were chosen to start the screening.

City officials also emphasized that when someone turns out to be positive, there's no need yet to call for a "reunion" among relatives or settle grudges with enemies. "Being positive only means possibility for infection, and if they don't go for treatment, that would lead to cervical cancer."

The World Health Organization (WHO) in 2023 revealed that around 12 women die of cervical cancer every day in the country, and ranks as the second most common and fourth most common cause of death among women in the 15- 44- year- old age group. This disease is also found to be leading in fatality among women living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus or HIV.

#### High morbidity

It added that every year, around 15 out of every 100,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and more than half or about 68 percent are more likely to die in the same year of their diagnosis. Experts have said that the high rate of morbidity is because of low vaccination and screening coverage of girls and women. The lofty rate of mortality, on the other hand, is being blamed on delayed treatment among women and precancerous lesions.

The disease is now seen as a burden and for the past decades, the government has stepped up efforts and other interventions to combat it, now highlighted with the passage of a landmark piece of legislation, Republic Act No. 11215 or the "National Integrated Cancer Control Act" or NICCA. The law ensures "cancer prevention and improvement of cancer survivorship by strengthening essential programs and increasing investments for the entire cancer care continuum."

This policy also calls for the establishment of a favorable environment by introducing optimal technologies for the prevention of cervical cancer, improvement of early detection rates, and ultimately, the reduction of social, economic, and emotional burden of cervical cancer as a public health problem.