

Working with the Government Sector for Better Health Outcomes

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Achieving good healthcare outcomes has always been challenging for marginally resource countries like the Philippines. I say challenging and difficult to a certain degree because this goal involves serious preparation and planning, require wise use of logistics, and quite possibly, a synchronization of current efforts and initiatives in order to ensure adequate optimization of available resources. Collaboration with the right sectors and players is a critical and pivotal ingredient in the whole process.

The government's present efforts to hit key healthcare targets have always been under scrutiny from various sectors and authorities. Although encouraging strides have been accomplished in key programs (and these are acknowledged by external bodies), when it comes to health and well-being, no good thing may be enough and more will always be demanded. The citizenry, especially the afflicted individuals, need to be able to feel the benefits behind these positive figures and numbers. Efforts need to be palpable and cascaded well. In this regard, the public sector's actions to forge and strengthen its partnership with focal players will be crucial.

The private sector, especially those involved in the provision of healthcare, has always been acknowledged as a key player. This is understandable considering its complement of healthcare facilities, leaders in key positions and in the academe, organized professional societies, experts from various specialties, and its peculiar reach and sphere of influence. This unique group, when properly harnessed in a collaborative manner, will certainly provide a good platform for health programs with its members as potential advocates and leaders.

But what will make collaboration effective? How could a private practitioner, who is usually busy (and probably contented) with his clinics and administrative responsibilities and other roles in the hospital and medical organizations, expand his comfort zone and partner with his government counterpart? What will make this engagement genuine and sustainable?

Partnering with government will possibly evoke certain initial reactions. Isn't the accomplishment of health program goals the main responsibility of the Department of Health (DOH)? Program managers and government workers are paid primarily for this purpose, right? Programs connote tedious protocols, forms, reports, and policies. These tend to be non-compromising and may not be malleable to suit the realities seen in private practice. These are real concerns. However, if you step back and analyze, these may in fact be your primary drivers to desire collaboration with the public sector. These may be the factors which a private physician or a medical society could and should alter. We have to admit that the best option to possibly introduce these changes is through forging an alliance with the public health sector. Navigating such a course may be associated with less resistance with the end results and recommendation readily endorsed but also quite candidly, may be time consuming and prone to frustrations.

I think one should recognize by now that government cannot achieve quality health objectives alone. Its current efforts are indeed laudable. However, I still feel that it needs to search out appropriate partners and collaborate. It needs to admit its limitations but it also needs to truthfully declare its strengths and make its resources available. The private sector, for its part, should stop being too critical and adopt a cooperative mindset and approach. Professional societies should reach out and share its talent, energy, ideas, and possibly resources, with our government counterparts in the health sector. After all, we are all trying to target similar agenda when it comes to our country's health and well-being, correct? Most likely, we are just doing this by utilizing different platforms and venues which may be readily available to us. Could these platforms complement and synergize each other? Certainly, such an approach would lead to wiser use of resources and a positive "ripple effect".

I've been in private practice for over a decade and a great majority of this period was spent on one of my passions- the control of tuberculosis (TB). Fortunately, I was able to lead a vast group of organizations and individuals with the same goal when I became the national chair of the Philippine Coalition Against Tuberculosis (PhilCAT). I can tell you without a doubt, that this experience was an eye-opener and a demanding yet rewarding phase of my career. Unquestionably, the position called for partnership with the DOH specifically with its National TB Control Program (NTP). Admittedly, hesitancy and awkwardness would usually emerge during my initial engagement with the staff of the NTP. However, as time passed away, I began to know them more on a personal level. I have never seen such a committed group of individuals. I found out that they also experienced the same initial reactions and perceptions that I did. But the best way to hurdle these potentially destructive

thoughts was the realization that we were after the same goal. This made discussions and interactions more open and candid and productive. This alliance led to a lot of collaborations, public-private partnership activities, TB control models and innovations, and a lot of out-of-the-box thinking. Today, the country is acknowledged as one of those which successfully implemented public-private mix DOTS (PPMD) units and TB healthcare service delivery models in the private sector.¹ NTP has continuously acknowledged the significant role of this sector in the TB control arena.

What happened in TB in terms of public-private partnership and with other diseases may possibly be applied to other health-related interests. Experience has taught me that we just need a “tipping point” that could potentially facilitate this collaboration and usher in the needed partnership that could accomplish the necessary changes and inject the required energy. This could be in the form of an advocate or a champion from the private sector or in a particular locality, an event or health situation (hopefully not of epidemic proportion)... or why not a dynamic and diverse group like the PCP? Anything that will compel us to initiate and sustain some plan of action with the public sector can act as a catalyst. This collaborative concept should be encouraged as this may affect the development of policies and crafting of programs that may indeed be relevant beyond the framework of a program.

As I mentioned, our government cannot do this alone. The time has come where we, as private practitioners, cannot just be passive and maybe even worse, just complain and just criticize and not act on the things that we see and experience. This situation becomes more terrible if you have the skills set and clout to affect these changes and assist in making better health outcomes.

Achieving improved health outcomes remains elusive. Collaboration with the government health sector may indeed be tedious and wracked with challenges. However, this is what we badly need at these crucial times when we look beyond the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). I assure you that the experience will be rewarding and satisfying at a different level. I bet that you will feel a sense of fulfillment when figures are flashed during national program review and evaluation and you can confidently assure yourself that you were able to contribute to those numbers being on-target. An added positive feeling may further emerge when the public sector pinpoints the specific private sector contribution and that this is one of their drivers for success. You will definitely smile when you are specifically identified as an individual or authority that made achieving better health outcomes possible.

References

¹WHO publication. 2013 *Global Tuberculosis Report*

¹Dr. Benedicto was a national chair of the Philippine Coalition Against Tuberculosis (PhilCAT) and an advocate and authority on public-private mix in TB control