The Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) marks its 36th year of steadfast service in improving and contributing significant impact to the public health landscape, both locally and internationally. The Institute conducted a week-long celebration from April 17-21, 2017 with the theme "Envisioning Potentials, Strengthening Performance".

In the opening ceremonies, RITM Director Dr. Socorro Lupisan underscored that the people working for the institution serve as the backbone that envisions and strengthens the purpose of RITM. She then expressed her utmost gratitude to those who continue to serve their purpose.

"We have a lot to be thankful for. The success of the institution rests upon the people who continuously strive and deliver their best in pursuing the vision of RITM," said Dr. Lupisan. "We are RITM, and we aspire to realize the goal that we have for the people and this country."

Surveillance and Response Unit holds 1st Annual Meeting

RITM Surveillance Officer Rowena Capistrano led SRU’s first of many meetings. Capistrano explained that SRU aims to continue this annual meeting to further strengthen our partnership and forge a unified effort in preventing, detecting, and responding to all emerging and re-emerging disease both occurring naturally or intentionally.

Ultimately, SRU intends to prime trainers, and prepare frontline outbreak responders for emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases while strengthening and improving different surveillance systems for other infectious diseases.

The three-day conference gathered insight and feedback from more than 150 participants through breakout sessions for (1) the final review of the RITM Manual for Specimen Collection, Transport, and Referral during Infectious Diseases Outbreak Response, and for (2) the development of the manual’s training module.

Serving as an open dialogue between SRU and its stakeholders, the breakout sessions were effective in gathering remarks that will further improve and develop the usability of the manual for its end-users.

With funding from ASEAN CANADA GPP and USA-Health Security Partners, RITM-SRU expects the manual to be rolled out by the end of the year 2017.

Representatives from the different National Reference Laboratories within RITM, Epidemiology Bureau, Disease Prevention and Control Bureau, Department of Agriculture, Philippine National Police, various Regional Epidemiology and Surveillance Units and City Epidemiology and Surveillance Units, some DOH retained hospitals, subnational laboratories, and private hospitals participated in the meeting.

The RITM SRU was created to integrate, coordinate, and report clinical and laboratory surveillance data generated by the Institute which could be helpful for epidemiological modelling and studies on various infectious diseases for early warning and impact reduction.

RITM launches Achievement Report

The Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) through its Communication and Engagement Office recently launched RITM’s Achievement Report encompassing year 2011 to 2015.

Covering five years of the Institute's numerous achievements, the publication was done through the joint efforts of the different departments that make up RITM.

With honor and delight, Dr. Lupisan promised that "we will continue to devote all our experiences, skills, and enthusiasm to cure and to protect the country from infectious and tropical diseases."
The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) upgrade from ISO 9001:2008 to ISO 9001:2015 certification prompted the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) to likewise upgrade its services by adopting the improved ISO standard.

RITM through the global provider of technical, safety, and certification services, TÜV Rheinland, went through a meticulous and extensive three day quality audit of its processes last May 3-5.

According to Quality Assurance Office (QAO) Head Dr. Edison Alberto, ISO standards are continually evolving, and organizations must follow and go through re-accreditation whenever ISO standards are amended.

“Compliance to and accreditation from ISO is significant to the Institute, because this testifies our commitment to ensure improvement in the services we provide to our customers,” said Dr. Alberto as he explained the importance for RITM to receive the new ISO certification. Overall, during the audit closing meeting, the auditors concluded that the RITM Quality Management System is in place and complies with the ISO 9001:2015 standards.

Two non-conformities were identified: (1) Ensure timely calibration of equipment; and, (2) Ensure performance evaluation of external providers. QAO was quick to submit the root cause analysis and the corrective action plan to TÜV Rheinland to show its commitment to improve its services based on the findings.

Welcome to the second issue of our external newsletter for the year 2017. In this issue, we highlight the initiative of our Aids Research Group in convening the youth to tackle one of the most controversial and stigmatized infectious diseases in the country – HIV/AIDS. With the growing need for public health communication, the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine continues to collaborate with partners in educating the public about the control and management of various infectious and tropical diseases in the country.

The release of this edition also marks an important milestone for the Institute as we celebrate 37 years of envisioning potentials in research and strengthening our work performance. True enough, the Institute has greatly expanded both in service and in numbers over the past years. RITM now has reference laboratories aside from its research laboratories, and is also known as a national referral center for emerging pathogens aside from infectious diseases.

With this in mind, our Institute is looking forward to the amendment of Executive Order 674 (EO 674), s. 1981. The amended EO is critical for the Institute to continue delivering its many, and expanded pioneering services efficiently and effectively.

I am grateful to all the people and partners working hand-in-hand towards achieving the mission and vision of the Institute. Together, we have witnessed the growth of RITM-DOH from being a tropical medicine research center to being recognized as the leading research institute for tropical and infectious diseases in the country.

Let us continue in our pursuit of improving and shaping the public health sector in the Philippines!
The complexity of the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS is yet to be explored although not without effort. Sadly, stigma reduction efforts fail short on the many HIV/AIDS programs being implemented in the Philippines. At the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB), students of the College of Development Communication (CDC) with the AIDS Research Group (ARG) of the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM), took one step closer in discovering HIV/AIDS beyond the tip of the iceberg.

Hi VP Gusto Kitamaki Makibida, a Forum on HIV/AIDS and the Filipino Youth was conducted on May 3, 2017 at the DL Umalil Hall with the goal of giving face to one of the most stigmatized infectious diseases in the country.

“This is a bold first step we are all taking, not just for ourselves, but to all those who are deeply affected by this issue. We titled this forum, ‘Kita Makilala’ not to trivialize the HIV/AIDS issue confronting the youth today but to give a face to a human face,” underscored Assistant Professor and forum organizer from UPLB-CDC.

According to the Department of Health, Region IV-A has the second highest share of HIV cases in the Philippines. It is therefore a very apt decision for RITM-ARG to host the second leg of its university caravan about the HIV/AIDS issue in the region.

Students from all over the region discussed and raised questions to the panelists: Head of AIDS-ARG Dr. Rosanna Ditangco, International Health Expert from UP Open University and Philippine Women’s University Professor Sawinder Rehal, and President of ASEAN Student Council Union Derrick Ordoñez.

Touching five key themes about HIV/AIDS issue, the discussion revolved around Awareness & Risky Behavior, Testing, Stigma, Lifestyle & Support from Social Institutions, and Self-worth.

Representatives from the Project Red Ribbon, an HIV and AIDS advocacy foundation, also conducted a free confidential HIV Testing.

On awareness and risky behavior

Prof. Rehal, International Health Expert from UP Open University and Philippine Women’s Health, emphasized that although it is different in every country, the youth shares the same pattern when it comes to risky behaviour. With sex being openly available nowadays, Prof. Rehal noted that sex has become more of a stress reliever than a romantic endeavour between partners.

He also talked about the ‘OPW Phenomenal’ which make it so that a lot of youths are left on their own leading to increase in risky behavior. Without proper guidance and open communication between child and parents, the youth tend to venture toward the so-called ‘hook-up culture.”

On testing positive and getting treatment

“Safe sex is not just the physical sex, but also its effect towards the emotional and mental state of a person.”

On lifestyle support from social institutions

As she addressed the youth, Dr. Ditangco urged them to be smart and not to engage on casual and unplanned sex. She advised the audience, most of which are students of UPLB and colleges from Calamba, to have self-control, discipline, and self-love.

At the family level, Prof. Rehal noted that “we need to first open up about the topic of sexuality.” He also pointed out the important role that media plays toward the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. He said the youth can act out as a bridge between the older and younger generation as a peer generator.

Mr. Ordoñez urged the youth “not to be afraid of medical experts and to seek medical advice.” On a final note, he said that the youth should inspire and influence other people to take a stand on HIV/AIDS.

On self-worth and acceptance

As the forum come to a close, everyone inside the venue were inspired as “V” himself took a stand on-stage.

Mr. Ordoñez then pointed out the role that social media dating apps play on awareness and risky behavior. Although it has become a norm nowadays, Mr. Ordoñez emphasized that “the youth can still be responsible when using those social media dating apps. We should make informed decisions.”

Furthermore, the forum also tackled the attitude of youth on the use of contraceptives. Dr. Ditangco pointed out that the majority of transmission happened during unplanned sex. Prof. Rehal added that “safe sex is not just the physical sex, but also its effect towards the emotional and mental state of a person.”

On stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS

The stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS continues to be one of the main reasons why people living with the disease are being denied of proper health services.

In a recent article from Huffington Post, UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé talked about the importance of overcoming the “stigma, shame, distrust, discrimination and apathy” that people associate with HIV/AIDS.

In the past, the fear surrounding HIV/AIDS is founded on the lack of information about its transmission. One of the activities conducted during the forum was a discussion on fact versus myth when it comes to HIV/AIDS. The audience were shown five statements, in which they have to raise either a red piece of paper if they disagree and a white one if they agree. The panelists then shared their expertise about each statement.

“Perhaps the sex education is to be played with the child’s annual gift. It is possible for someone with HIV to live as long as someone who is not HIV-positive,” explained Dr. Ditangco. With the proper treatment, she said it is possible and that he/she may also be able to get a job. Although, Dr. Ditangco also cautioned that there are some companies abroad such as the Middle East, Singapore, and Malaysia, among others that do not accept HIV positive immigrant workers.

She also explained that it is possible for a mother who is HIV-positive to have an HIV-free child. On the other hand, Prof. Rehal pointed out that gay people are not necessarily more prone to HIV infection. He said it still depends on the type of risky behavior that one experiences. Mr. Ordoñez seconded Prof. Rehal’s statement by saying that “gender does not dictate a person’s susceptibility to HIV/AIDS.”

On lifestyle support from social institutions

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On self-worth and acceptance

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V said he had a difficult childhood and did everything to survive so that he can go to school. “I wanted to be somebody, someday.”

V then shared that he was stigmatized by society and his family disowned him when they found out that he is HIV-positive.

At 23 years old, V said he almost wanted to give up, but his doctors gave him hope and urged him to be strong and survive. Despite other people seeing him in bad light, V said he wants others to know that “I’m okay. I’m still human and I can still be happy.”

V said HIV can be manageable. He said people with HIV should not be deprived of treatment. At present, V said he is working for a social hygiene clinic because he wants to inspire and educate others. “As long as we are educated, we can beat HIV!” urged V.

As he faced the audience head on, V said that people with HIV need to help themselves first before they can allow anyone to help them. He said, “I may have this virus, but I have not lost my humanity.”

by Ma. Patricia Lansang

by Ma. Patricia Lansang

"Is it love or hormones?" asked Dr. Ditangco. She said HIV is not an issue if there is truly love involved. She then touched in on the issue of monogamy and polygamy. Dr. Ditangco said that being your partner’s only lover, does not guarantee that one will not test positive for HIV/AIDS.

Prof. Rehal then furthered the discussion by pointing out three factors that affect people’s decision of getting treatment. According to Prof. Rehal, because of society’s tendency to stigmatize HIV/AIDS as an immoral disease, people, most especially the youth finds it hard to get treatment or even get tested. He also said that the location of facilities or clinics and people’s attitude towards HIV/AIDS affects people’s decision to get treatment.

On testing positive and getting treatment

"Testing is a win-win situation,” said Dr. Ditangco. She explained that most people still want to learn if it the hard way and refuse getting tested. Dr. Ditangco added that RITM clinics accommodate minors who want to get tested.

Although HIV/AIDS has no cure yet, Dr. Ditangco said people can still take life medication as treatment. But then, she said, people can make the choice to avoid it by making the right choice. “If you are not ready for a mature relationship, then don’t do it [sex].”

Dr. Ditangco further explained that “anal sex poses a higher risk because o.
RITM leads evaluation of DOH-IMCI program

The Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics (DEBS) of the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) together with the Acute Respiratory Illness (ARI) Study Group conducts the first-ever assessment of the status of the Department of Health’s (DOH) Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses (IMCI) Program.

DOH adopted and started the IMCI pilot project back in 1996 which made Philippines one of the first countries from WHO-Western Pacific Region that implemented the Program. The IMCI program combines delivery of essential interventions at the community, health facility, and health systems levels. It also includes elements of prevention and addresses the most common conditions that affect young children.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) developed the IMCI program in 1995 and was introduced as a major strategy for child survival, growth, and development.

According to RITM DEBS Science Research Specialist II Dr. Mark Donald Reñosa, “IMCI employs a step-by-step algorithm that guides non-physician health workers in resource-poor settings to assess, classify, manage, and treat childhood illnesses. It is being implemented in primary healthcare facilities of various communities nationwide.”

More than two decades in the Philippines, a thorough assessment of whether the IMCI program was effective in addressing childhood illnesses in rural health units and barangay health stations was never conducted.

Therefore, DOH Disease Control Prevention Bureau Director Dr. Joyce Ducusin recommended an extensive evaluation of the IMCI program and tasked RITM to lead the investigation.

“This is an important undertaking, because we need to determine if the existing program delivers what it promises to grassroot communities and if it directs us to our aspiration in attaining developmental goals for our country,” Dr. Reñosa explained.

According to RITM HIV/AIDS Core Team, Bureau Director Dr. Soccor P. Lupisan, recently signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Philippine Dental Association (PDA) Muntinlupa Chapter past President Dr. Angel G. Abel and Dr. Noel Tacorda for a five-year partnership of providing quality dental care for HIV patients.

“The Institute spearheaded this collaboration because it is part of our commitment to constantly and consistently cater to the needs of our patients providing better services, explained Dr. Garcia.

CURRENTLY, RITM HACT is organizing the training course on the basics of HIV/AIDS and infectious disease control as a preparatory step for the PDA dentists who will be handling RITM-HIV patients.

Five fellows marked the beginning of a new chapter as they graduated from the Infectious Disease Fellowship Training Program of the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) last June 16 at the Bayview Hotel.

RITM Director Dr. Soccor P. Lupisan honored Dr. Ralph Ansieto, Dr. Endymion Tan, Dr. Michelle Vonnabie Bala, Dr. Joan Bonasobra, and Dr. Maria Donelyn Goldborg-Mendoza for being the fifth batch to successfully complete the training program.

“This Fellowship Training Program serves as a pre-preparedness plan against outbreaks. We do not know when it could happen, but we do know that our fellows are always ready,” said Dr. Lupisan.

During the ceremony, RITM Assistant Director Dr. Celia Carlos presented a challenge to the graduates: “It’s not easy to do all three [research, teaching and clinical practice] but if you are able to do all three, we will expect to see you to be one of the pearls in Infectious Disease.”

Aside from the professional growth he obtained from the program, Dr. Tan emphasized that RITM’s Fellowship Training taught him the value of humility and camaraderie.

“The tiring and long-working hours, I had to love what I chose. True enough, I am very thankful to have been a part of this family,” Dr. Tan shared.

“Despite the tiring and long-working hours, I had to love what I chose. True enough, I am very thankful to have been a part of this family.” Dr. Tan shared. “If I have to start my fellowship training again, I would still choose RITM.”

The Philippine Dental Association (PDA) Muntinlupa Chapter Incoming President Dr. Victor F. Victoria (3rd from right), and PDA Muntinlupa Chapter Vice President Dr. Noel Tacorda (2nd from right) along with Clinical Research Oceana Dr. Angel G. Abel, Vonnabie Bala, and Michelle Vonnabie Bala, Dr. Joan Bonasobra, and Dr. Maria Donelyn Goldborg-Mendoza for being the fifth batch to successfully complete the training program.
RITM RESEARCH AWARDS

Dr. Fe Esperanza Caridad J. Espino
Recipient of the “Research Award” for actively leading the Department of Parasitology in developing and implementing multi-disciplinary investigator-initiated research projects that are responsive to public health needs. Dr. Espino’s latest research on the Comparison of three screening tests for G6PD Enzyme Deficiency Test has been internationally published.

Dr. Ferdinand V. Salazar
Recipient of the “Research Award” for spearheading pioneering studies on insecticide resistance in the Philippines; led studies on vectors responsible for transmission of infectious diseases; and, contributed to the Philippines’ insecticide resistance management plan. Dr. Salazar has published 23 international publications, book chapters, and technical reports.

Dr. Socorro P. Lupisan
Recipient of the “Research Award” for spearheading several on-going research projects such as the RITM TOHOKU Research Collaborating Center for Emerging and Re-emerging Infection, which have contributed valuable information in the management of infectious diseases in the Philippines. Dr. Lupisan has published more than 20 scientific publications in both local and international journals since 1999.

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