

DEMAND AND SUPPLY

By BOO CHANCO

**Ate Glue is right about affordable drugs**

If there is one program of Ate Glue that I truly support, it has to be the affordable prescription drugs program being implemented by Obet Pagdanganan. While I understand the need for drug companies to make a decent return so that they can continually research tomorrow's drugs, there is also a need for them to be reasonable and humanitarian, specially for developing countries.

Why, for instance, must Pfizer in India sell Norvasc, a high blood pressure medicine that many other Filipinos must take daily, at P5.98 per 5 mg tablet and P8.96 per 10 mg tablet and sell the exact same drug here at P44.75 per 5 mg tablet and P74.57 per 10 mg tablet? And this is not fake either, since the Indian Norvasc is also manufactured by Pfizer. In other words, Norvasc is sold in the Philippines at prices 650 percent to 750 percent higher than those in India. Is it because the Indians wouldn't stand for price gouging and we are such pushovers?

Actually, even Americans in the United States are up in arms. Poor American retirees who are dependent on Medicare and other health insurance programs must pay through the nose for prescription drugs made in America compared to what their cousins in Canada are paying for the exact same thing. This is why there is a prolific cross border trade in prescription drugs that was even parodied in last Sunday's episode of "The Simpsons" aired on Star TV. This is called parallel importing and the drug companies hate it.

Obviously, Canada's price control law is effectively making prescription drug prices reasonable. The pharmaceutical drug lobby in Washington DC is, however, terribly powerful so that poor Americans are no better than poor Filipinos when it comes to obtaining the kind of medicines they need to keep themselves healthy. Life expectancy is sacrificed on the altar of corporate greed.

Obet Pagdanganan wants to amend the Intellectual Property Code so health authorities can conduct tests on medicines whose patents are expiring to lower the prices of drugs in the country. Obet is supporting the

proposed bill filed by Sen. Mar Roxas that would amend the code in such a way as to complement the government's parallel importation program. This will help make health-care goods and services available at affordable prices.

That sounds reasonable to me. We are not talking of breaking the patents of drugs. We are talking of being able to produce or import drugs whose patents have already expired. There should be no reason why people shouldn't have immediate access to generic medicines in the local market once a drug's patent expires.

Obet wants to be allowed to start testing the generic equivalent of those drugs whose patents are about to expire a year or so before that happens. The patent laws in several countries allow the development, testing and experimental work for the registration of a generic medicine during the patent period of the original product. But the local code isn't explicit about it.

I think passing the Mar Roxas bill is a more urgent life and death matter for Filipinos than the cha cha. Our political leaders must bear in mind that it is the responsibility of government to make health care goods and services available at affordable costs. The WHO agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and the 2001 Doha Declaration recognize the primacy of national interest and public health.

But then again, our politicians obviously have a different life and death set of priorities: Political survival or worse, the interests of lobbyists.

Ateneo

I got this response from Paulo Francisco A. Agustin, an Ateneo graduate to my column last Friday.

I have read your article expressing your opinion regarding the current state of Ateneo education brought about by your reflection during the graduation ceremony last Friday. While I do agree with some of the points that were raised in your article, particularly the problem regarding the monoculture of the rich within the school,

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