

By MARICHU A. VILLANUEVA

## Senior citizens' woes

A year from now, President Arroyo will join the ranks of "senior citizens" in our country. Mrs. Arroyo celebrates today her 59th birthday in the pink of health. Aided by age-defying outlook in life, the President looks young despite the enormous problems she has to bear as Chief Executive of this troubled country for the past five years now. Becoming a "senior citizen" next year, however, is the least of the worries for President Arroyo.



Mrs. Arroyo's three immediate predecessors were longstanding members of the "senior citizens" club. Former President Corazon Aquino turned 73 years old last Jan. 25. Ex-President Fidel Ramos, who celebrated his birthday last March 18, is now 78. Deposed President Joseph Estrada is turning 69 years old on April 19.

But the three ex-Presidents belong to what could be a privileged group of "senior citizens" who enjoy the twilight of their age in very comfortable lifestyle. While not joining rallies demanding for the resignation of President Arroyo, Mrs. Aquino has kept herself busy with her pet project, the "Bahay Kalinga" for the homeless poor. Since his retirement from government service, Ramos, on the other hand, has continued his peripathetic way of life, mostly attending speaking engagements here and abroad and giving "unsolicited advice" every now and then to whoever now occupies the seat of power at Malacañang Palace. While his personal freedom is rather restricted by the Sandiganbayan where he has been undergoing plunder trial, Estrada has been detained comfortably at his sprawling 16-hectare rest house in Tanay, Rizal.

For the many less privileged "senior citizens," including my 68-year old mother, they could only complain about the high costs of living. This is literally speaking especially about very expensive medicines to keep them healthy or to cure their ailments. As a beneficiary of my late father, she receives a monthly Social Security System (SSS) pension of P3,500. Like the rest of SSS pensioners, my mother deplores they have not received any increase in their monthly pension since the Arroyo administration took over in January 2001.

The SSS pension of my mother, who takes insulin every day for her diabetes, is definitely not enough to pay for her medicines. This is why she was thankful when Republic Act (RA) 9257 or the Expanded Senior Citizens' Benefit Act was finally enforced after a long delay. RA 9257, authored by then Senator and now Vice President Noli de Castro, included hospitalization bills aside from the purchase of medicines among the items entitled to 20 percent discount for all certified holders of "senior citizen" discount card. This discount privilege for "senior citizens" like my mother gave some form of relief that eased their health bills.

That was before the 10 percent expanded value added tax (EVAT) was raised to 12 percent by RA 9337 effective Feb. 1 this year. It was like the right hand giving this charity while the left hand taking it away. You can just make the mental calculations of the 20 percent discount, deduct the 12 percent EVAT and what is left of this discount is just eight percent.

And what about those non-senior citizens like us who also need drugs and medicines? We have to bear and grin with the full brunt of the 12 percent EVAT.

As provided for by RA 9337, the only exempted products from EVAT were unprocessed agricultural, fish, poultry, and meat products.

Alas, we can only heed the advice of doctor-turned-Senator Juan "Johnny" Flavier, former Secretary of the Department of Health (DOH) who became popular for his slogans like "Let's DOH-it" and other homespun humor spiels. In one of his commercial advertisement spiels, Flavier gives this wise counsel to the public "Bawal Magkasakit!"

The amiable Senate president pro tempore, who is ending his second and last term at the Senate, has turned commercial endorser of cheaper but equally potent herb-based vitamins and preventive maintenance medicines. After all, the former DOH Secretary is a strong advocate and supporter of RA 8423 or the Traditional Alternative Medicines Act. This is not to mention the other laws passed by Congress supposedly designed to help bring down the prices of drugs and medicines like the Generic Act, which Flavier pushed passage into law when he was still DOH Secretary. However, throughout these years, the price of drugs and medicines, especially the imported ones manufactured or distributed by multinational pharmaceutical companies, have steadily risen instead of going down.

Another former Cabinet official turned Senator, Mar Roxas III strongly campaigned for the introduction of "half-priced" medicines program of the government which he started when he was still the Secretary of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). It was during the Estrada administration when Roxas explored the importation of cheaper yet the same efficacy branded medicines from India until he left the Estrada Cabinet late in 2000 at the height of the impeachment trial against the deposed President. After he returned as DTI Secretary when President Arroyo took office at the end of EDSA-2, Roxas continued this "half-priced" medicine program.

The importations of "half-priced" medicines are being done through the Philippine International Trading Corp. (PITC), one of government-owned and controlled corporations under the DTI. Mrs. Arroyo designated former Agrarian Reform Secretary Roberto Pagdanganan as president and chief executive officer of PITC to champion the "half-priced" medicine program of her administration.

Aside from importation, the "half-priced" medicine program has also enjoined other local and multinational pharmaceutical companies to offer lower priced branded medicines and among the first to heed this appeal is United Laboratories (Unilab), a local drug manufacturer of such brands as Enervon C vitamins, among its medicine products. The "half-priced" medicines are now being sold in "Botika ng Bayan" in a number of urban poor areas around the country aside from government hospitals where the people can buy them.

Sadly though, efforts being exerted by the government to lower the prices of medicine is getting stiff resistance from affected quarters. Pfizer, one of the world's biggest drug manufacturers, has sued the PITC in local courts and quasi-judicial bodies like the Bureau of Food and Drugs Administration for alleged infringement of intellectual property rights. Hopefully, a compromise solution can be reached between the feuding parties with public health and safety as primordial common grounds of concern.

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