



UPHS: At the frontlines

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UP Health Service (UPHS) was a constant if not overlooked feature of the campus.

No one likes the idea of being unhealthy, and the small, somber building facade did little to indicate the major improvements that were already taking place behind the scenes.

In 2017, the UPHS was migrating to electronic medical records and providing free services and medicine up to P2,000 as part of the study “Philippine Studies in Primary Care.” It was envisioned to be a model primary health care facility providing basic services for the majority of a person’s health needs. It was in the middle of renovations when the pandemic hit in early 2020.

From being one of the smaller support units on campus under the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Community Affairs, the UPHS was suddenly thrust front and center of UPD’s COVID-19 efforts, its capability increasing to meet the growing threat.

In March, the UPHS became a member of the UPD COVID-19 Task Force.

On Apr. 21, along with the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy and with the help of Act as One PH, the UPHS opened Kanlungang Palma (KP), the first isolation facility at then unoccupied Palma Hall, equipped with 50 beds and access to the testing facilities of the Philippine Genome Center.

The UPHS Public Health Unit (PHU) conducted an information campaign, conducting a series of training sessions for a total of 51 volunteer contact tracers composed of university students, employees and faculty members starting on May 15, a day before quarantine restrictions in Metro Manila were eased to general community quarantine.

On Jun. 12, the PHU conducted a Zoom orientation for the Health Liaison Officers (HELOs) of the various UPD units about biosafety, even as the situation worsened.

Reflective of the national situation, cases continued to rise. On Jun. 23, seven UPHS health care workers tested positive for the disease and the number of new cases that week had risen dramatically to 23 from the previous week’s eight. By the 29th, the UPHS itself had to be closed down for five days for disinfection.

In July, despite the decrease of the number of new cases to below 10 during the first two weeks and due to the impending start of the second semester, KP closed its doors permanently on Jul. 11.

From Jul. 20 to 26, the UPHS began administering free flu vaccinations to interested UPD employees. At around the same time, the numbers of new COVID-19 cases spiked to 30, culminating in the highest number of new cases since the pandemic began at 52 by the time July ended.

After this spate of infections, the UPD COVID-19 Task Force reviewed the COVID-19 strategies and agreed on several courses of action.

One of these was to intensify engagement with the immediate community: Barangay UP Campus. On Aug. 12, members of the Task Force along with the PHU and the OVCCA's Office of Community Relations met with purok leaders via Zoom and shared UPD's strategies to mitigate disease transmission. This was followed by a lecture by PHU head Aliza Pangaibat, MD on COVID-19 transmission, case detection in the community, isolation/quarantine and testing. Similar meetings followed on Sept. 7 and 11 at the Institute for Small-Scale Industries.

Another course of action was to open another community isolation facility to house the existing confirmed cases. Silungang Molave (SiM) was launched on Aug. 15 with 39 beds at the renovated Molave Residence Hall. The shift to remote learning made the building available as a temporary facility.

"Our experience in running Kanlungang Palma, our first isolation facility which closed on Jul. 11, 2020, has also given us lessons. We have taken these to heart, as we proceeded with SiM," said UPD Chancellor Fidel R. Nemenzo.

Another strategy was to identify UPD employees at high to very high risk of exposure to COVID-19 and subject them to regular testing. Units conducted their own risk assessments and submitted the employee names while a team of doctors, medical technologists and a dentist from the UPHS collected the samples.

As a result, the transmission slowly but steadily declined and by the last week of November, the number of new cases had dropped to below 10.

Throughout all of this, UPHS continued to provide services by embracing telemedicine and

booking consultations through the scheduling software Appointlet.

On Jun. 1, outpatient consultations to all UP-mandate clientele and residents began. Patients could book appointments online through <https://uphs.appointlet.com> with UPHS physicians and meet with them through Viber, Google Meet/Hangouts or landline upon confirmation of the appointment.

Six days later on Jun. 7, the specialty clinics followed, creating a separate appointlet website at <https://uphs-specialist.appointlet.com>.

Soon, the UPHS dental clinic and nutritionist-dietitian would join on Jun. 15, providing teledentistry services and online nutrition consultations (every Wednesday and Thursday) through <https://uphs.appointlet.com>.

For their efforts in containing the spread of COVID-19, the UPHS received commendation from the Quezon City Health Department through its officer-in-charge Dr. Esperanza Anita N. Escaño-Arias, MD.

The UPHS began 2020 working their way to being a model primary care facility, equipped to deal only with minor isolated outbreaks of things like food poisoning.

By the end of 2020, UPHS had acquired the ability and capacity to deal with a full scale pandemic on campus with the help of the UPD administration, fellow employees and the larger community. The early December data shows an even better decline in the number of new COVID-19 cases. The PHU now maintains a pool of 22 active, trained contact tracers. UPHS services have continued throughout the ordeal.

Services at the "infirmatay" have served as a lifeline for UPD throughout the worst pandemic the 21st century has experienced so far.

UP Health Service (UPHS)

