

## THE PHILIPPINE PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE LAST 100 YEARS

MANUEL M. DAYRIT  
*Former Assistant Secretary  
Department of Health*

Dr. Tiglao's paper gives a wonderful perspective of how Philippine Public Health has been like these in last 100 years. I would like to frame my reactions to it within the framework of a story about a Chinese emperor who lived even much earlier in history. This way, we dig even deeper into the wisdom of the ages.

"This story is about Emperor Liu Bang who in the third century B.C. became the first ruler to consolidate China into a unified empire. To celebrate his victory, Liu Bang held a great banquet in the palace, inviting many important government officials, military leaders, poets and teachers, including Chen Cen, a master who had given him guidance during the campaign. Chen Cen's disciples, who accompanied him to the banquet, were impressed by the proceeding but were baffled by an enigma at the heart of the celebration.

"Seated at the central table with Liu Bang was his illustrious high command. First there was Xiao He, an eminent general whose knowledge of military logistics was second to none. Next to him was Han Xin, a legendary tactician who'd won every battle he'd ever fought. Last was Chang Yang, a shrewd diplomat who was gifted at convincing heads of state to form alliances and surrender without fighting. These men the disciples could understand. What puzzled them was how Liu Bang, who didn't have a noble birth or knowledge comparable to that of his chief advisers, fit into the picture. "Why is he the emperor?" they asked.

"Chen Cen smiled and asked them what determines the strength of a wheel. "Is it not the sturdiness of the spokes?" one responded. "Then why is it that two wheels made of identical spokes differ in strength?" one asked Chen Cen. After a moment, he continued, "See beyond what is seen. Never forget that a wheel is made not only of spokes but also of the space between the spokes. Sturdy spokes poorly placed make a weak wheel. Whether their full potential is realized depends on the harmony between."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>From Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops. Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*. Hyperion New York 1995.

Where public health is concerned, what are the spokes, what are the spaces?

Dr. Tiglao has already provided some answers to these questions. Let me cite 3 main spokes (although I know there may be more).

First is the public health infrastructure - personnel, resources, organization, systems - which has been strengthened over the years. It is interesting to see how this has evolved to the decentralized public health system we have now.

Second is the scientific and technological advances which have been developed through research and development: drugs and vaccines, the bifurcated needle for the elimination of smallpox, technologies for vector control to cite a few.

Third is the mass-based approaches to mobilize populations and community participation to widen the coverage of tested interventions.

All these are spokes in the wheel of Public Health.

The other question however is what are the spaces? This is the trickier issue. The spaces represent the harmonizing elements which strengthen the spokes. Let me cite to you what I believe might represent the "unseen" - the spaces that are so important for strengthening the spokes.

First is the mindset for healthy living especially in present times when many of our illnesses are determined by lifestyle.

Second is the value placed on equity. This is anchored on a mode of socio-economic development which over the long term alleviates and eliminates poverty.

Third is the value placed on the preservation of the environment, prevent its degradation, and making life on the planet wholesome.

If these "spaces" do not harmonize with the spokes, I believe there is no way we can achieve long-term achievements in public health over the next 100 years.

The spaces are perhaps at the level of the spiritual - reverence for self (healthy living), reverence for others (equity), and reverence for the environment.

To conclude: I am persuaded that we are already seeing the epidemics of both the present and the future. Infectious disease problems are still commonplace but are said to be on the wane - perhaps. Over the next several decades, we shall be seeing chronic disease problems much of them related to what is probably the single largest risk factor of industrial times - tobacco use. Eventually I am told that we will be seeing a wave of depression as the stresses of living, the loss of meaning and meaningful relationships increase.

The ultimate management of the future will lie in managing "what is unseen" even as we manage with the traditional tools of public health known to us.

Thank you.