

H1N1 influenza and Cory's cancer battle

The top health stories of the year in review

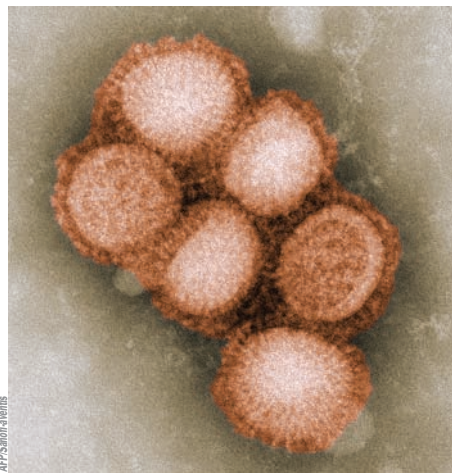
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A pandemic waiting to happen. The death of a national icon. Nature's wrath unleashed by rats. A doctor disowned. Medical matters were all the rage from the start of the year when Filipinos greeted 2009 with unresolved anxiety about a livestock virus. Things reached fever pitch with the apocalyptic bustle over the flu, the death watch, and national catharsis as a former president fought her last, and the compounded tragedy of typhoon-flood victims.

The H1N1 influenza

It was known as "swine flu" until hog raisers raised a howl over the animals' indictment in what may be 21st century's first true influenza pandemic. As potential cases mounted since late April, so did general hysteria, even before the first local case involving a female traveler was confirmed late May. The Department of Health itself roiled sentiments, publicly advising Filipino boxing champ Manny Pacquiao in early May to self-quarantine by postponing his homecoming



AFP/Smitajevitch

from a victorious US bout with English boxer Ricky Hatton.

Quarantine became routine, almost a buzzword among the travelling class. And many business establishments would sooner admit the unshod and underdressed than someone with a suspiciously high body temperature. Even as the initial panic winds down, the word "flu" has become reinvested with marketing magic as some businesses rush to cash in on flu prevention.

Cory's last rally

A lingering illness and death brought a country together, with possible consequences to the country's near-term political



AFP/Alfredo

future. A private citizen since she left office in 1992, Corazon Aquino in her deathbed was effectively plucked out of retirement to be a charismatic leader one last time when her final struggle with colon cancer and hero's burial drew a national outpouring of prayers and sympathy.

As Filipinos stormed the heavens to pay one last respect to Cory, the renewed fervor crystallized into a strong movement to push for the candidacy of son Noynoy for the highest office of the land.

Ondoy, Pepeng and leptospirosis

Many who lived to see another day after hell in high water with typhoons Ondoy and Pepeng found out that the nightmare didn't end after the two left the country's area of



AFP/L. Allibe

responsibility with a death toll of nearly 1,000. Cramped evacuation sites and places where flood refused to subside were haunted by the specter of infections and water-borne diseases.

Weeks after Ondoy, leptospirosis—a deadly, water-borne disease contracted from bovine, canine, and rat urine—finally made its presence felt in outbreaks around the most flood-affected areas in Metro Manila, Pangasinan, and La Union. As of late October, the DOH reported that the total number of cases of more than 2,000 with 167 fatalities is almost triple the national total in 2008.

A doc named Hayden Kho

Young, handsome, and allied with success,



AFP

he exudes "celebrity doctor" from every pore. And then allegedly came Dr. Hayden Kho Jr.'s most bizarre breach of the time-honored patient-doctor relationship and confidentiality, recorded in faithful details, spread like wild virus and milked for all its sensational worth in the local media and Senate hearings.

Although not a reflection of his skills as a doctor, Kho's involvement with a high-profile sex-video scandal is viewed by the Philippine Medical Association, among others, as a serious blot on the integrity of the profession and sufficient cause for taking away his license to practice medicine.

Drug-price control

After the passage of the cheaper-medicines law last year, drug firms as well as hospitals were none too happy to swallow the



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bitter pill of mandatory price cap under the maximum-retail-price (MRP) provision of the law. The application of this reserve instrument through a July 2009 executive order came after the government found unsatisfactory a previous round of voluntary price reduction by the industry for 16 essential drugs and 22 other medicines.

The jousting over the MRP on the eve of its implementation last August was primarily between the DOH and hospital owners who at one point leveled the threat of a hospital holiday if they were forced to sell drug inventories at prices lower than acquisition costs.

Reproductive-health bout

Proponents of family planning and population control scored a minor victory this year when, after several false starts, a reproductive-health bill finally made it past the committee level in the House of Representatives and looked set to reach bicameral deliberations.

The Catholic Church, chief nemesis of



AFP/No

the proposed Reproductive Health and Population Development Act of 2008, is not backing down, calling up fears that the bill is leading the country down the path of allowing abortion and objecting to a provision on sex education for the young. It has mounted conspicuous opposition down to the parish level with anti-RH slogans in local communities.

Ebola restless

The Year of the Ox began as doomsday for pigs afflicted with the Ebola Reston virus. This virus, previously found only among Philippine monkeys, baffled medical authorities anew in late 2008 by making the species leap to pigs. Although it poses little harm to human, it has an uncomfortable association with cousin strains in Africa that were lethal to humans.

The flurry of local and international attention as 2009 started culminated in the depopulation of around 6,000 pigs from swine farms in Bulacan, ending the anxiety over the restless ways of a curious Philippine plague ... for now.

Dengue buzzes by

Apart from stealing some thunder from Filipino boxing champ Nonito Donaire, hospitalized for dengue in early September, and



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at least one outbreak reported in the north, the perennial headliner disease of years past generally kept a lower profile this year. The DOH reported an almost-40-percent decline in incidence going into the fourth quarter of 2009 compared with the same period last year.

The catastrophic flooding in Metro Manila and elsewhere revived concerns that the incidence might spike with a vengeance in the last part of the year. The National Capital Region continues to have the highest number of dengue victims in the country while a marked rise in incidence within the year was noted in some parts of the Visayas.

High-school test

High-school students braced for a different kind of surprise quiz in the first quarter of the year as the Department of Education and the DOH moved to implement mandatory random drug testing in secondary schools amid opposition by the Commission on Human Rights, some activist groups, and politicians. Question on the legality of the move was earlier raised but was upheld by the Supreme Court.

The extension of random drug testing to high-school students was linked to the last year involving scions of some prominent families in Metro Manila and embroiling some Department of Justice officials in a corruption rap.

Pharma tectonics

The ground from under the global pharmaceuticals experienced some major tremors with four mergers and acquisitions happening within the year. The merger early this year of Pfizer and Wyeth, together still



the biggest drug company in the world, set the pattern for the three other consolidations.

All served to broaden the product portfolio of the surviving entity as generic-drug companies move in on traditional markets. In the case of Solvay, which sold off its entire pharmaceutical unit to Abbott, the intent was to leave the industry altogether and focus on its chemical and plastics business.

The merger of Merck, Sharpe & Dohme and Schering-Plough in the last quarter of the year is said to create a global pharm entity next only to Pfizer-Wyeth in size. Glaxo-SmithKline's acquisition of Stiefel provides it with an established foothold in the specialty dermatological market. **M**