Regional experts, government leaders call for action to address cancer in aging population

MANILA – About one of six deaths worldwide is due to cancer, the second leading cause of global fatalities estimated at 9.6 million in 2018 alone. At least 70% of deaths from cancer occur in low- and middle-income countries.

As people continue to age but with health behaviors and lifestyles not likely to improve faster, the occurrence of cancer among elderly persons will increase, with countries in Southeast Asia and Europe leading in morbidities. By 2030, the World Health Organization estimates that persons aged 60 and up will surpass the population of 10 years old and under. By 2050, they will be 2.1 billion and will outnumber children 5 years and younger.

The impact of cancer occurring in a transitioning population will greatly challenge the capacity of societies to respond.

Medical experts, doctors, scientists, academics and political leaders in Asia Pacific nations gathered today to look at how medical care in countries experiencing the rise of cancer with the increase of their older populations can level up to something that is just, strong and holistic.

Convened by the International Society of Geriatric Oncology (SIOG), the SIOG Policy Meeting 2019 is gathering and consulting with regional stakeholders who share knowledge and experiences to formulate policies for medical professionals and public health officials in providing better health care for the elderly with cancer.

During the meeting, Dr. Susan Pineda-Mercado, deputy secretary-general of the Philippine Red Cross, said in her keynote speech that population ageing will greatly impact economies and health needs because of a changing disease structure. "The medical care demand must be upgraded to one that will be suitable for an aged-society diagnosed with cancer, she said.

"Supporting SIOG in engaging the region is timely in the global health agenda as we exchange knowledge, and experience to come up with a shared vision for better treatment outcomes to our aging population afflicted with cancer. Addressing the needs of older people with cancer is not just about social justice – it is also our moral responsibility," she added.

SIOG partnered with the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Center for Tropical Medicine and Public Health (SEAMEO Tropmed) for this meeting, participated in by health ministry officials of Southeast Asian countries, including professional medical societies, oncologists and geriatricians.

Dr. Hans Wildiers, President of SIOG, said, "Cancer is a disease of aging, but even though older persons comprise the majority of cancer cases, they are more likely to receive less treatment and are under-represented in clinical trials."

Wildiers enjoined the participants to always refer to SIOG guidelines and educational tools that are essential to good clinical practice in geriatric oncology.

Prof. Dr. Sandra Tempongko, deputy coordinator of SEAMEO Tropmed, said the regional center is honored to co-organize the policy meeting. "We share with SIOG and the public health officials and experts gathered here in SEAMEO Tropmed's vision of human resource development in working toward improving the quality of life of people in the region, especially the elderly persons."
Pineda-Mercado invited the participants to a call for action for better health services and strengthened health systems in their respective countries for the elderly with cancer, especially those who are vulnerable and in under-resourced areas in the region.

In the Philippines, she said population ageing is a reality as the country is experiencing a proportion of older persons 60 years old and above at 8.2% of the population as of 2015 and continues to increase. She cited evidence from research that ageing is the main factor driving increased cancer incidence that is in need of health systems that advance and promote better treatment and care services for improved quality of life of older cancer patients.

Pineda-Mercado underscored the work of SIOG in forging the shared interest and commitment of countries to strengthen local capacities that are relevant and integrated and are in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

She cited the political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases in September 2011 as an instrument that called for the need to upscale efforts in the area of cancer.

"The recognized need for enhancing clinical practices and research and education for the elderly population with cancer represents a new shift in thinking, with the objective being able to provide all countries with health capabilities to monitor, prioritize and maintain locally relevant, system integrated health research and clinical practices," she said.

"Our collaboration will support individual researchers, institutions and governments in establishing well-designed and impactful international partnerships," she added. "Let us continue to demonstrate to policy makers how important such associations are for combatting cancer in the vulnerable elderly, as we seek improved access to infrastructure and funding for our partnerships."