

**SPEECH OF
HIS EXCELLENCY BENIGNO S. AQUINO III
PRESIDENT OF THE PHILIPPINES
GLOBAL FORUM ON RESEARCH AND INNOVATION FOR HEALTH
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(to be delivered by DOST Secretary Mario Montejo)

I am honored to speak on behalf of President Aquino. Allow me to share with you his message on this occasion:

Today's gathering has been quite some time in the making: the Philippines was first chosen to play host to the Forum 2015 two years ago. I could not be more pleased to finally welcome you to our country—not in the least because I am personally looking forward to the advances in public health that this event will generate.

I have often likened the Presidency as a job akin to that of viewing hundreds of television channels at once, where you are expected to know every detail of what has happened and what is happening, and even to predict what can happen in the future.

In so many aspects—from climate change to health issues—the parameters of governance have shifted from the parochial mindset, to that of a global one. The world has shrunk in more ways than one; innovations in information technology and transportation have allowed us to communicate and travel with ease.

As this audience knows, however, ease of travel, in some cases, has facilitated the spread of illness.

Agreeing, then, that our concerns today are more global, then there is a need for all of us to address these threats together: to do research that educates us in how to prevent and how to cure illness that recognizes no borders. It behooves all of us to cooperate more and more given the urgency of these diseases. The past few years have given us prime examples: MERS, SARS, and Ebola, to name a few.

Unfortunately, while these pandemics are global, their solutions are not necessarily so; there is a need to consider measures that fit with the country's specific context. For instance, last year, a returning Filipino from the Middle East tested positive for MERS. Existing guidelines mandated that it was enough to monitor this person as well as those immediately surrounding him on the airplane. Had we followed this protocol, we would have called him up and said, "If it isn't too much trouble, please isolate yourself from contact with others, and if you develop any symptoms, then please tell us at the soonest possible time."

Now, this was an Overseas Filipino Worker who had probably been away for a year, at the minimum. In my country, the return of a friend or relative after a long absence is a cause for celebration: the entire village would probably have met him at the airport, where those closest to him would embrace him.

Now put yourself in the shoes of this Filipino: having just spent an extended period of time away from home, do you think he would tell his friends and family, “No! Get away from me”? Protocol mandated passive surveillance on the part of government, but, given the Philippine context, these seemed inadequate to us, and we acted accordingly.

Though it was Holy Week at the time, when Filipinos are typically on vacation, all the necessary authorities were called in. We tracked down every person on the flight, quarantined, and tested them within the soonest possible time. The good news: the results were all negative. What followed in the wake of that incident: we took a good hard look at our system, in order to make them stronger and more effective. I also signed an Executive Order creating an interagency task force to manage the threat of infectious diseases in our country.

To my mind, this is what the spirit of innovation is about: we must never be satisfied with the status quo, and instead, look at it with a critical eye, towards making constant improvements. This has been the bedrock principle of our administration throughout its term: from passing critical legislation like the Sin Tax Reform Act and the Reproductive Health and Responsible Parenthood Act to modernizing health facilities and equipment; to working to ensure universal healthcare—so much so that the poorest forty percent of our population can now receive treatment for free, for both common illnesses and catastrophic diseases.

We have also increased the budget for the Philippine Council for Health Research and Development, from 32.80 billion pesos in 2010, to 445.18 billion pesos in 2015. The same increase has been given the Department of Science and Technology's R&D budget: from 1.77 billion in 2010 to 2.34 billion pesos in 2015.

We now have the RxBox, a device that can capture medical signals and transmit health information like blood pressure and temperature via the internet. RxBoxes are used in isolated and disadvantaged communities; clinical specialists in the Philippine General Hospital are on standby to receive and analyze transmitted information, and respond with expert advice. The government has also supported R&D for herbal drugs such as *lagundi* for cough and asthma, *yerba buena* for body aches, and *akapulko* for ringworms and skin fungal infections, among others. This support has paved the way for their commercialization, listing in the Philippines' Drug Formulary, and royalty earnings as herbal drugs.

Indeed, whether in the sector of governance or health: innovation cannot arise from complacency; it is imperative that we search for better ways to serve our fellowmen. Standing here today, I am heartened to see that so many of you from different corners of the globe share the same view, and are actively working to improve the state of public health, especially in developing countries.

It is precisely in forums like this one that new ideas and partnerships can be generated—those that may lead to the next medical breakthrough; those that can refine our processes according to the contexts that we share; those that can redound to thousands of lives saved. Governments like ours will indeed continue to do our part, but it is always a relief to know that we have partners like you by our side—partners who maintain constant vigilance and actively take part in ensuring the well-being of our peoples.

Thank you, and good day.