



¡Alerta!

August 8, 2020
PREMIERE ISSUE

PhilHealth Plunder

The Philippine Health Insurance Corporation, better known as Philhealth, has been hugging front page headlines with, what should we call it, anomalies and scandals. For weeks before the Senate hearings began, rumors were going around about the problems in PhilHealth suggesting that we were dealing with systemic infection, blood poisoning at its worst. The grumbling came loudest from hospitals, who were unsuccessful in chasing after PhilHealth to reimburse them for expenses going back to last year.

Now it's disgruntled people from within PhilHealth who are spilling the beans about a [Philhealth](#) mafia pocketing as much as P15 billion and that PhilHealth's funds might be good only for a year more.

We should be concerned. Through the last few years we would read about scandals like unnecessary cataract surgeries with the hapless elderly poor as victims, and kickbacks in dialysis centers and now it seems they were only the tip of the iceberg. I was looking through the Internet for these scandals and was jolted to see big [exposés going back to 2015](#).

Could it be, we should be asking now, that the accumulated fraud is why the implementation of the Universal Health Coverage Law, signed into law with much fanfare in February 2019 kept getting postponed, until it was overtaken by the lockdown in March? And that attempts to jumpstart that law have met opposition from [PhilHealth](#)?

Despite its many flaws, Universal Health Coverage could have brought some relief for Filipinos during this Covid-19 pandemic.

As things are, we are left at the mercy of a near bankrupt PhilHealth. Promises that severe Covid-19 cases will be eligible for PhilHealth [reimbursement](#) of up to P750,000 run hollow.

Even that P750,000 would not be adequate for hospitalization costs, which can run from P3 to P8 million for one Covid-19 confinement.

It will not be surprising if hospitals begin to turn away Covid-19 patients who might not be able to pay for confinement, given that there is no guarantee that the hospitals will ever get even part of the expenditures back from PhilHealth. As early as last year hospitals were threatening not to renew their [PhilHealth accreditation](#).

There can be only one word for what is happening in PhilHealth: plunder. In Filipino it sounds even more ominous: pandarambong. Given all this is happening during the pandemic makes the plunder even more obscene.

Will heads roll?

Probably a few, but we need to see some resignations based on the principle of command responsibility. And these officials need not worry – even if the death penalty is restored, plunder is not included as [a crime punishable by death](#).

Now to explain Alerta, the asterisk was meant to lead you to this footnote although it does look good as part of the name. What the name of this hybrid of an e-zine and blog will be ¡Alerta!, with two exclamation marks as it is spelled in Spanish and did you know there is no word, not even in Spanish, for the [inverted exclamation point](#)?

Health Action Information Network (HAIN), a non-government organization dedicated to research, information and education, turned 35 in May. We had ambitious plans to restore a newsletter that we published for almost 20 years: Health Alert, with 227 issues in all, providing timely news and practical information around health. This new Health Alert will be totally online and free.

But we've been delayed rolling out our Reopening Issue and so we thought: given the urgent needs for information during these Covid (or coronavirus) times, we thought we should come out with a kind of blog that highlights emerging issues, stuff that might not even make it into mainstream media. Here at HAIN, we will be curating and compiling information from media all over the world and, in the tradition of Health Alert, we will discuss health and medicine with various lenses: cultural, political, economic.

¡Alerta! gives you the news and more: analysis and commentary, electronic links and resources, and calls to action. We're not leaving this PhilHealth plunder issue yet. Wait for announcements here in ¡Alerta!

Yes, ¡Alerta! sounds too much like brand names for the antihistamine loratidine but ¡Alerta! is part of an older Filipino borrowed from Castilian Spanish, a call to people to be vigilant in the face of impending danger. We even have a song Alerta Katipunan, a call to arms.

Maybe the antihistamine analogy isn't too bad either. We live with so many social allergies – to politicians, to instant Covid experts, to generals that have declared war on people rather than the virus. No drugs, no masks, can solve the problems of these allergens. What we need is to be alert, informed, discerning and ready to act.

Who's behind ¡Alerta! and soon, Health Alert? I'm vacillating between "I" and "we". We is HAIN. "I" is Michael L. Tan, trying to revive HAIN and Health Alert. I work with Emie B. De Vera, who handles the layout and the web. We hope to have more people coming in to help, so expect illustrations, photos, colorful and lively lay-out, all that of course being the externals. We'll work hard on the core, the substance in the tradition of HAIN.