

# GMA to decide this week on EO reducing medicine price

President Arroyo will decide this week whether to issue an executive order slashing prices of certain medicine.

The Department of Health (DOH) is carefully studying the list of drugs submitted by pharmaceutical firms last week to beat the deadline of the voluntary reduction of prices.

In separate interviews, Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita and Trade and Industry Secretary Peter Favila said Mrs. Arroyo will no longer entertain any last-minute appeal to stop implementation of the Universally Accessible Cheaper and Quality Medicine Act.

Favila said the EO cutting the prices of medicine by half will cover those that pharmaceutical firms failed to include in the list submitted to the DOH.

"There is a law that we have to implement," he said.

Favila said Mrs. Arroyo gave drug firms until Saturday to submit the names of 21 drugs that the DOH specified should have a 50 percent price cut.

"Drug firms would be penalized if they would not comply with the law," he said.

In a telephone interview with THE STAR, Dr. Robert So, DOH pharmaceutical management unit program manager, said the DOH and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) would have to validate the accuracy of the prices submitted by 10 drug firms.

"We have to make sure that in the end, there will be the price reductions mandated by law, so we have to be careful in checking," he said.

"This will only take a few days. We have to make sure these are not just token submissions to beat the deadline or buy more time or even circumvent actual price cuts."

So said the drugs have different "preparations" which also have also to be taken into account.

A drug firm could list a particular brand for anti-hypertension for voluntary 50 percent price cut, but that particular medicine could not be as saleable as another drug of the same firm, he added.

The DOH would make a final recommendation to Mrs. Arroyo for the EO to be issued, he added.

## 'Roxas is to blame'

Mrs. Arroyo's signature on an EO slashing the retail price for 21 essential drugs is no guarantee that prices of medicine will go down, according to Iloilo Rep. Ferjanel Biron, principal author of the Universally Accessible Cheaper and Quality Medicine Act.

Biron, a doctor by profession, said these drugs don't even include those for tuberculosis, malaria, dengue or intravenous fluid.

"Assuming for the sake of argument that the President will sign the EO, the question is will this benefit the poor and indigent Filipinos?" he said.

"No, because the EO contains only 22 out of 1,600 drugs that we are subjecting to automatic price regulation."

Biron blamed Sen. Manuel Roxas II for removing the drug price regulatory board in the bill's original version from the House of Representatives.

Roxas wants the lowering of drug prices to be the sole discretion of the President, upon the recommendation of the health secretary.

Biron said Roxas and the other 22 senators cannot compel Mrs. Arroyo to sign an EO imposing maximum retail prices on some medicine.

"The sad thing is, we can't compel the President to sign it, that is the law. It is up to the President to sign it. If her judgment is not to sign it because of some other reasons, there's nothing we can do, we can't force her because that is the version of Sen. Roxas," he said.

Biron said Roxas should use his "garlic props" for patients diagnosed with hypertension since "it was he who killed the law on cheaper medicine," he added.

Biron said Roxas pushed for a deregulated industry by way of parallel importation, and left it to Mrs. Arroyo to decide on price caps.

"This maximum retail price was never his brainchild, he was pushing for parallel importation from the very start. He removed our provision."

On the other hand, Iloilo Vice Gov. Rolox Suplico, who originally authored the law when he was in Congress, said Roxas should be honest enough to accept blame for a castrated law.

"We should blame Mar for the continued exorbitant drug prices in the country today," he said.

"Mar abolished mandatory price regulation and the Drug Price Regulatory Board during the law's deliberation in the bicameral conference."

Suplico said Roxas, the killer of the cheaper medicine act, should not be allowed to profit from its death.

"He has the decency not to use it as a Janus-faced prescription for his presidential ambitions," he said.

"He should be reminded that the original bill was for the benefit of the poor, while the castrated law is a haven for multinational pharmaceutical companies."

## 'Drug firms blocking law'

A non-government organization accused yesterday drug companies of blocking implementation of the cheaper medicine law.

Dr. Geneve Rivera, Health Alliance for Democracy (HEAD) secretary general, said Mrs. Arroyo must exercise the political will to slash the prices of medicine.

"For more than two decades, every legislative and executive action to make medicine more affordable has been suppressed by big industry players," he said.

The current situation with the Arroyo government is already like a bad re-run of scenes played out years ago.

Rivera said that during the crafting of the Generics Law of 1988, the big pharmaceutical transnational corporations (TNCs) had embarked on a vicious disinformation campaign to discredit generics.

"During discussions on the provisions of the Generics Law, the drug companies promised 'self-regulation' in lieu of government-imposed guidelines on drug promotion and advertising," she said.

Rivera said the TNCs continue to instigate generic drugs are "sub-standard" or "poor quality," as compared to their branded products.

"In fact, when the Generics Law was finally signed, they had the temerity to request for a two-year reprieve before the law was implemented," she said.

"Again, experience shows us that there is no self-regulation by big drug companies. Is there any wonder that their offers now are met by stakeholders with skepticism if not derision?"

"There is much to be done with-in and beyond the provisions of the Generics Law and the cheaper medicine law, if we genuinely want to serve the welfare of the people. The only thing needed is sincerity and political will."

Meanwhile, the Consumers' Action for Empowerment said compel multinational pharmaceutical corporations to make their prices affordable for Filipinos instead of giving them the option of voluntary compliance.

Eleanor Nolasco, Consumers' Action for Empowerment convener, said that Mrs. Arroyo's obvious hesitance in giving relief to millions of poor and ailing Filipinos only goes to show her utter subservience to the interests of transnational corporations.

"For decades, many poor people have suffered and died because they cannot buy exorbitantly-priced medicine," she said.

"The billions of profit that they have amassed after decades of control on medicine prices should be enough for them to consider the poor's sake this time."

Nolasco said Mrs. Arroyo has shown her indecisiveness to stand behind the people's right to low-cost medicine by failing to exercise her prerogative to impose maximum detail price on essential medicines.

"Why should she provide a 10-day window period for these profit-driven companies to decide on

voluntary compliance?" she said.

"If the president of the Republic of the Philippines is genuinely sincere in lowering medicine retail prices, she should demand and not appeal to these companies to substantially slash their prices to even lower than 50 percent."

Nolasco said that for every single day that Mrs. Arroyo hesitates to put her foot down on making essential medicine accessible, thousands of Filipinos are further deprived of medicine for food and other necessities.

"The government should provide incentives to the industry's small local players such as tax holidays and exemptions as well as lower fees on different BFAD requirements," she said.

"One year has passed but RA 9502 failed to keep its promise of making essential medicine accessible to the people. — Paolo Romero, Deon Porcella, Helen Flores, Eliza Osorio, Christina Mendez