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DOH says no go yet for booster, 3rd shots

BY GERARD NAVAL

DESPITE approval from the Health Technology Assessment Council (HTAC) and the Department of Health (DOH), the administration of booster shots and third doses of COVID-19 vaccines will not yet start in the country.

This is according to Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire who said the country is still waiting for the recommendation of the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE), the principal advisory group to the World Health Organization (WHO) on vaccines.

She said the SAGE recommendation will be out in November.

A booster shot is one given to persons whose immune response may have weakened over time while a third dose is for individuals who may not have had enough immune response from the first two doses.

Vergeire said they also have to wait for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to issue separate emergency use authorizations (EUAs) for the vaccines set to be used as booster or third doses.

However, the government is already preparing for the administration of booster shots and third doses.

“(Health) Secretary (Francisco) Duque has approved the recommendations of HTAC. And all planning are now underway,” said Vergeire.

HTAC is an independent advisory body mandated to provide guidance to the DOH on the coverage of health intervention and technologies to be funded by the government.

In its interim recommendations on October 13, booster shots may be given to healthcare workers and senior citizens by the fourth quarter of 2021, and eligible priority groups by 2022.

An additional dose may be given in 2021 and 2022 for immunocompromised individuals.

The National Task Force against coronavirus disease (NTF COVID-19) said the 3 million doses of Sinovac vaccines which arrived in the country on Sunday night will be used as third dose and booster shots of vulnerable individuals such as the health workers, elders, and those with comorbidities or are immunocompromised.

“This shipment is a preparation for the vaccination for the third dose. The DOH already announced the administering of booster for our health workers, our senior citizens, and those with comorbidities, immunocompromised,” NTF chief and vaccine czar Carlito Galvez said in Filipino.

Galvez said that as of October 24, the Philippines has received about 97.7 doses of vaccines. Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said

BOOSTER

55.7 million doses have been administered nationwide with, 33.33 percent of the targeted population fully vaccinated.

UNVACCINATED SENIORS

At least three million elders in the country have yet to be vaccinated, said Dr. Rabindra Abeyasinghe, Philippine representative of the World Health Organization, said at the “Laging Handa” public briefing.

He reminded the Philippines to continue prioritizing the vulnerable sector amid the inoculation of adolescents and preparations for the administration of third and booster shots.

“The priority is to provide the first and second doses to those who have not been able to get a single shot, which is about three million people unfortunately still in the Philippines among the elderly,”

Abeyasinghe said.

DOH data showed that as of October 24, some 4.59 million senior citizens have been fully vaccinated while 3.74 million are still waiting for their second shots, and some 7.13 million individuals with comorbidities have been fully vaccinated along with 2.528 million health workers.

The WHO has recommended giving a third dose to senior citizens, especially those who received Chinese vaccines Sinovac or Sinopharm as first and second doses, and those with comorbidities.

Abeyasinghe said a third dose should be given first to those who are most severely immunocompromised followed by those aged 80 years and older, followed by those aged 70 year and older, and 60 and older.

He reiterated a booster shot is not recommended for the general population.

He also said that the giving of third shots should be done after

the priority sectors have been fully vaccinated.

“We need to be very conscious of the equity issues. WHO has raised previously several times its concern that we do not see equity. We see inequitable situation with regards to access to vaccines in the provinces and the regions outside of NCR and the major cities, especially for the most vulnerable, the A2 and A3 groups,” he said.

Abeyasinghe said 30 to 40 percent of the A2 group (seniors) and A3 (persons with comorbidities) in many provinces have been vaccinated.

“So with increased availability of vaccines, we continue to urge the local government units in those regions to make sure that as they roll out vaccines, they ensure prioritization is also followed so that those most vulnerable groups are vaccinated,” he said adding that the threat especially of the COVID-19 variants are still there. — *With Jocelyn Montemayor*

