

# Medical Interns as Volunteers in the COVID-19 Vaccination Drives in the Philippines

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## The Experience

The Philippines, with 2,434,753 confirmed cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and 37,405 related deaths as of September 23, 2021, is the second worst hit Southeast Asian country.<sup>1,2</sup> With an all-time high of 26,208 single-day cases in mid-September 2021, the appearance of highly infectious variants of concern (VOC) of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), might have been a factor of the exponential increase of COVID-19 cases in the country, as is suggested in other countries.<sup>3-5</sup> In fact, the highly transmissible Delta variant is the most dominant SARS-CoV-2 variant in the country, alongside with the other VOCs such as the Alpha, Beta, and Gamma variants.<sup>6</sup> As infections continue to rise, hospitals are becoming increasingly overburdened in addition to the inadequate supply of hospital equipment and medicines due to a global shortage.<sup>7,8</sup>

**Figure 1.** Postgraduate intern (PGI) as a volunteer screener in a vaccination drive in a rural community.



In response to the rising number of COVID-19 cases, the Philippine government, through its Department of Health (DOH), has accelerated its vaccination campaign in order to achieve their target of vaccinating at least 70% of the population to achieve herd immunity, as the COVID-19 vaccine has been proven to fight the pandemic in other countries with successful vaccination responses.<sup>9-11</sup> Unfortunately, the Philippines has not yet met its goal, with only over 21% of the country's population receiving their first dose, and only 18% having full vaccination status as of September 23, 2021, since the vaccination drive started seven months prior.<sup>12</sup> Although the Philippines is expecting for more COVID-19 vaccines to arrive, ramping up the country's vaccination efforts has been very challenging since healthcare workers and those who staff the vaccination drives are continuously getting infected.<sup>13,14</sup> According to the recent DOH report dated on September 15, 2021, COVID-19 has infected 24,284 healthcare workers, resulting in 104 deaths.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, many healthcare workers have also resigned due to decreasing quality of life brought on by work overload, mental health impacts, and protesting in the streets due to the government's failure to provide them with the promised benefits.<sup>15-17</sup>

**Figure 2.** PGIs as volunteer vaccinators in a university gymnasium (a) and a drive-thru site (b).



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Faced with this challenging problem of manning vaccination drives due to inadequate healthcare workforce, the DOH has requested volunteers, including the postgraduate interns (PGIs) who recently finished their medical degree, to volunteer as screeners, encoders, vaccinators, and health educators, with the approval from the Commission on Higher Education and the directors of their affiliated training hospitals. To encourage them to volunteer in the vaccination drives nationwide, the PGIs are given proper credits in their community and elective rotations.<sup>18</sup> With guided supervision by licensed physicians, their voluntary work and community exposure are also part of their medical training since several of them completed their clinical clerkships online with little to no practical experience due to the pandemic's impact on education in the Philippines.<sup>19,20</sup>

**Figure 3.** PGIs as volunteers in one of the vaccination drives in the Philippines.



During the vaccination drives, the PGIs are responsible in manning the different areas such as the waiting room, registration, health screening, health education, vaccine administration, and observation areas, respectively (*Figures 1-4*). During this time, PGIs can hone their skills in history taking by asking patients questions about their health, including current medications being taken, history of vaccination, exposure to COVID-19, and allergies. Furthermore, they can practice and enhance their instructional and interpersonal skills while acting as health educators and playing a key role in the administration of vaccines among others. Indeed, as future healthcare professionals, PGIs are regarded as those with closest capability to take part in battling the current pandemic.<sup>21</sup> While it is true that the current pandemic has hindered the implementation of conventional medical education, it is also without a doubt that this pandemic emphasized the need for global health and disaster preparedness, an enormous learning opportunity to develop skills on multidisciplinary preparedness, health information management, emergency decision making, and

leadership during crisis, in addition to the basic medical knowledge and clinical competencies for PGIs.

**Figure 4.** PGIs as volunteers during a COVID-19 vaccination drive for the pediatric population in Manila, Philippines.



Through this initiative, volunteer PGIs were able to acquire valuable experience by performing in a real-life setting, gaining practical hands-on knowledge, and making a significant impact in the lives of people in the community by sharing their knowledge and skills and fulfilling their mission to heal and serve mankind while learning more about healthcare conditions in the Philippines. The PGIs were quick to rise up to the challenge as they signed up for vaccination drives to join the medical community in their fight against COVID-19. Many countries have also taken similar steps, such as recruiting volunteers to assist with their mass vaccination rollouts.<sup>10,22-25</sup> This initiative can be emulated by other countries with inadequate healthcare workforce in order to speed up their vaccination efforts.

### Summary - Accelerating Translation

Sa pagnanais at pagsusumikap ng gobyerno ng Pilipinas na makamit ang herd immunity laban sa COVID-19, nanawagan ang Kagawaran ng Kalusugan sa mga postgraduate interns, na nakapagtapos ng kanilang degree sa medisina, na makilahok sa mga programang pagbabakuna bilang bahagi ng kanilang mga rotation sa komunidad at electives, habang ginagabayan at pinangangasiwaan ng mga lisensyadong manggagamot. Sa pamamagitan ng inisyatibong ito, ang mga boluntaryong postgraduate interns ay nagkaroon ng pagkakataong makapagkamit ng makabuluhang karanasan sa pamamagitan ng aktuwal na pagtatrabaho, pagkakaroon ng praktikal na kaalaman, at pag-iiwan ng mahalagang bagay sa buhay ng mga tao sa komunidad sa pamamagitan ng pagbabahagi ng kanilang kaalaman at kasanayan at pagtupad sa kanilang misyon na pagalingin at paglingkuran ang sangkatauhan habang patuloy na natutuhan ang mga kondisyon ng pangangalagang pangkalusugan sa Pilipinas.

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