

INTERVENTION AT "BANGUNGOT NG DENG VAXIA FORUM," UP CENTER FOR INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT STUDIES, MARCH 9, 2018

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(This event was organized by Womanhealth, Dignidad, Social Watch Philippines, Focus on the Global South, Trade Justice Pilipinas, UPCIDS, and Third World Studies Center.)

What accounted for what one former head of the Department of Health calls “a major health nightmare of our time?”

I have written two articles for Rappler where I characterized the process that led to the Dengvaxia mess as a rush to disaster on two fronts: one, a rush by Sanofi to market a defective product, the other, a rush on the part of the Aquino-Garin DOH to conduct a mass immunization program. It is clear that corporate greed was behind Sanofi's decision to market a dangerous vaccine. It is also difficult to understand the decision of the Aquino-Garin DOH to hurriedly undertake a massive vaccination program with what they knew was a flawed product unless there was some payoff, political or economic, involved.

First, Sanofi. It had put a lot of money into developing Dengvaxia and was eager to recoup its investment as well as make a killing on the market. A big stop sign to its plans, however, emerged when in September 2015, the New England Journal of Medicine, one of the most prestigious journals of medical research, came out with a meticulous research report asserting that CDY-TDV, the clinical name for what came to be branded later as Dengvaxia, could later result in severe dengue if administered to children below nine years old who had not been infected with dengue prior to vaccination. “This partial, waning immunity is a particularly unwelcome outcome after vaccination,” the journal editorialized.

Instead of heeding the warning signs and subjecting the vaccine to more clinical trials over a much longer period of time to make sure that it was safe for all age groups, Sanofi went ahead to market the vaccine, bagging a 3.5 billion peso contract with the DOH for its use in mass immunization. After the immunization of thousands of Filipino children above the age of nine, Sanofi admitted that the safety of the vaccine could not be assured for children above 9 years old and came out, on Nov 27, 2017, with a recommendation that the vaccine be relabeled as not

recommended for all people not previously infected with dengue. But that was too late for over 800,000 children that had been vaccinated.

Let's now go to the Garin DOH. Let me say first of all that Secretary Janette Garin's predecessor, Dr. Enrique Ona, kept his distance from Sanofi and, despite Sanofi's assurances that Dengvaxia was ready for use, he did not allocate any item for Dengvaxia immunization in the DOH's 2016 budget proposal. Had Ona remained DOH chief, we would most likely have been spared the tragedy we now face. But Ona, a real professional, was maneuvered out of his position by Garin, whom he had recommended to be his undersecretary in the first place. After forcing Ona out, Garin, a real smooth operator, went on to dismantle Ona's moves to provide universal health care like that in Thailand and replace them with vote-getting gimmicks like hiring 20,000 "health assistants" and purchasing hundreds of overpriced "DOH medical buses" from China. But most alarming, according to DOH insiders, was her getting very tight with Sanofi, whom Ona had kept at a distance.

Garin was flown to Sanofi's Paris headquarters, and Garin and Sanofi persuaded then President Aquino to make a visit to Sanofi one of his major stops during his trip to Paris in December 2015, an item that was totally unrelated to the reason he was in Paris in the first place, which was to speak at the United Nations Climate Conference. Things then moved very fast, with Garin not heeding the warning of both the authoritative New England Journal of Medicine piece nor that of her own Formulary Executive Council which opposed the mass immunization program and requested Garin to go slow and on a much smaller, experimental scale. As Dr Melissa Guerrero, head of the FEC said, it was the first time she witnessed such speed in the approval of the budgetary allotment for a drug.

Many people have said the only possible explanation for Garin's reckless behavior was if something external to the DOH vetting process was operating. I believe this was the case, though of course it will be the official investigation that will determine this. There are several possible motives. One was for the immunization program to be a "legacy project" for Garin, one she could use as an asset for future campaigns for public office. But there is a possibility that there was a corporate payoff involved. The deal with Sanofi was sealed as the 2016 elections were nearing. At that time, the ruling Liberal Party was scrounging for campaign funds. So desperate was it search for money that it marginalized reformers in the party like Among Ed and put in leadership positions corrupt elite politicians who had command over votes and money, like Governor Leila Pineda of Pampanga, the wife

of “jueteng king” Bong Pineda. I strongly suspect that Sanofi coughed up money that went into either Garin’s account or the LP’s campaign coffers.

By the way, I don’t think only Garin should be prosecuted. Aquino and his budget secretary Butch Abad must also be held accountable, at the least for criminal negligence. That the money paid to Sanofi was bigger than the DOH’s whole immunization program and that Garin was taking obvious shortcuts in the drug approval process should have been red flags calling for intervention by Aquino and Abad to slow down the process and ask questions. Unless, of course, they were in on the deal themselves.

Just a few words on the so-called Doctor’s for Truth statement. I wrote an article on it that sparked a long debate in Rappler between Dr. Edcel Salvana of the UP School of Medicine and me which, I believe, clarified the issues involved. I just want to mention two things. First, Dr Salvana agreed that the mass immunization program was premature and unprofessional in implementation and that the key officials involved in it should be investigated and prosecuted. Second, one real difference we had was whether all supplies of Dengvaxia should be taken off the shelves. He felt that without access to the vaccine, many people who could take the vaccine without incurring the possibility of having severe dengue might die. My position was that much more clinical testing was needed to be done to ensure the vaccine was safe for everyone; otherwise, there could be many more who would die if Dengvaxia is prescribed for people now thought to not be at risk according to the flawed testing carried out by Sanofi.

My last words are on why I wrote that article criticizing the Doctors for Truth statement. It’s because it was statement ostensibly concerned with the panic created by opportunistic personalities exploiting the Dengvaxia catastrophe for their own purposes but was actually an effort to deflect the blame from Garin and Sanofi. You will search in vain for a condemnation of the Garin DOH and Sanofi in that declaration, which takes to task only the opportunists and demagogues like Gordon, Mocha, and Acosta. Many of the signatories were snookered into signing that statement owing to their legitimate concern that the people’s anxiety over Dengvaxia was driving them away from having their children treated with essential vaccines, without realizing that they were being used by Garin and Sanofi’s buddies in the medical profession to turn the public’s attention away from them and their culpability. It’s so dishonest.

Thank you.