



“ANG RAYUMA KO SA PANAHON NG COVID-19 PANDEMYA”: *Virtual Lay Forum*

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By: Danilyn Rose Q. Torres-Morado, MD



The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled the entire global community to sail through uncharted waters. As routines were interrupted, we had to adapt to an entirely new reality in many aspects. Communities were “quarantined” to stay home, but health care workers had to continue our advocacy to empower our patients and keep them informed on matters of key importance during this crisis. Thus, the Rheumatology Sections of St. Luke’s Medical Center and University of Santo Tomas Hospital, under the overall supervision of Dr. Jonathan Consignado, spearheaded this year’s second virtual lay forum “Ang Rayuma ko sa Panahon ng COVID-19 Pandemya” held last October 18, 2020 via online platforms. Attended by a total 72 participants from all over the country including NCR and neighboring provinces, reaching as far as Iloilo and Cebu City.

The event kicked off with opening remarks by Prof Sandra V. Navarra, who avidly shared the video clip “Great realizations” focusing on the silver linings and new perspectives that COVID-19 pandemic has offered, many of which we have taken for granted - the environment, our family and friends, freedom, health, and gratitude. Indeed, sometimes, the world has to “get sick before it starts feeling better”.

Then master of ceremonies Dr. Anthea Tan introduced her co-fellow Dr. Bryan Perez, who presented the survey results on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of patients with rheumatic diseases. The top 3 challenges for patients were 1.) COVID-19 infection and its medications, 2.) difficulty getting consultations and lab tests, and 3.) mental issues.



Professor Sandra Navarra officially opening the virtual lay forum

To address these, Dr. Perez reminded the audience of the different signs and symptoms of COVID-19 to watch out for, the different tests to detect presence of COVID-19 in which he reiterated the use of rapid antibody and antigen tests, both having low sensitivity rate, and that RT-PCR remains to be the gold standard in detecting the virus. The participants were also made aware of the latest updates on the status of the vaccines and that at present, there are still no known cure for the virus. Highlight of the lecture was on what medications to continue or discontinue when infected with COVID-19 and the right time to resume these medications once recovered from the disease. To address the mental health issue of our patients, Dr. Perez shared ways on how we can strengthen our mental health and overcome our fears like saying a serenity prayer of acceptance, performing physical activities, breathing exercises, and using your imagination as these may release tension and stress.



Dr. Bryan Perez as the keynote speaker for the event

To provide a personal account on the difficulties of our patients, we had “patient partners” share their firsthand experiences with regards to the challenges they had to face during this pandemic. Mrs. Elyn Centeno (RA), Mrs. Rowena Sia-Ortiz (Scl), Mr. Clark Ferrer (AS), Mr. Josef De Guzman (PsA), and Ms. Robelle Tananganan (SLE) shared their personal struggles, but most importantly how they overcame these challenges. To summarize, aside from the economic situation that has worsened due to the increasing unemployment the pandemic has brought about, it has more importantly imposed fear, worry, and anxiety due to contact restrictions and isolation. Amidst these difficulties, they came out stronger because they were empowered to be more independent, to take better care of their health, and how they were able to enhance their creativity which eventually allowed them to generate income to sustain their basic daily necessities at this time of economic recession.



Dr. Juan Javier Lichauco officially closing the program

The activity was aptly concluded by a message from Dr. Juan Javier Lichauco, president of the Philippine Rheumatology Association, who thanked the participants especially the sharers for their inspiring stories. As Dr. Lichauco reiterated, 2020 may have brought about a difficult path bringing on a state of anxiety and confusion, but, as the months went by, things became clearer and allowed us to realize the most important things in life that would include health, family, friends, and faith in God. For every difficulty, there is always an opportunity and after all these pass, we will all be better and stronger individuals with the hope that in each little way, we will contribute to a much better world for everyone.

Yes, this battle is hard and long, but it’s now time to move forward and focus on the brighter side.

