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Palawan winning war on malaria with use of simple method

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY—It didn't take sophisticated equipment or complex chemical processes to wage a successful war against malaria in Palawan.

All it took were mosquito nets and a type of insecticide that kills mosquitoes on contact.

Mosquito nets soaked in Etofentrox helped bring down the number of malaria cases in the province by 76 percent in the last six years, according to health authorities that helped distribute these nets to towns that have been plagued by the mosquito-borne disease.

"We have seen a progressive decline in the number of cases ... since 2000 when the program started," said Dr. Rey Angluben, project director of the Kilusan Ligtas Malaria (KLM), which is run by the provincial government and the Pilipinas Shell Foundation Inc. (PSFI).

The trend has raised hopes among local health officials that malaria would be eradicated sooner than expected. Palawan hopes to be malaria-free by 2020.

Angluben said in a press briefing on Wednesday that the antimalaria campaign had been centered on encouraging households to use the treated mosquito nets, which are effective for six months.

After six months, users are asked to bring the nets back to the barangay health centers to be dipped in the insecticide.

Some 50,000 mosquito nets under the program have been distributed and "microscopy centers" and health clinics have been set up in many villages to attend to patients, according to PSFI program manager Marvie Trudeau.

Nets for free

This year, Trudeau said, the nets, which cost P276 (\$6) apiece would be given away for free.

Malaria is caused by a parasite called plasmodium that is transmitted by mosquitoes. Red blood cells are inflamed and ruptured, leading to death in extreme cases.

Palawan tops a list of 26 provinces that account for 90 percent of malaria cases nationwide, according to the KLM. It has 47 percent of all the cases, Trudeau said.

Recorded deaths from malaria went down from 45 cases in 2000 to 12 last year, Angluben said.

"There has been an observed decline in the prevalence of malaria over the past few years," KLM officials said. In 2006, 13,084 cases were recorded throughout Palawan compared to 22,245 cases in 2004, when the campaign started to pick up.

The PSFI has poured in about P150 million in grants over the past six years to fund a range of activities, including the spraying of households to destroy the mosquitoes' breeding areas.

"We are using etofentrox and not DDT, even if the World Health Organization still allows its use for disease control," Angluben said.

Information campaign

He credited the program's information campaign for much of its success. More communities have become more aware of the disease, how it can be prevented by the simple use of mosquito nets, and by knowing that the barangays are equipped with free medicines for patients, he said.

Jane Evangelista, an official of the provincial health office, said the information campaign had also been aimed at encouraging people with symptoms of malaria to undertake blood smear tests.

"Our more pressing concern right now is the complacency on the part of many affected communities because of this seeming

success, and the possibility of sudden outbreaks as shown by our previous experiences," Trudeau said.

[^ Back to top](#)

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