

## **WHAT IT'S LIKE TO SUSPECT YOURSELF OF HAVING COVID-19**

### **BUT UNABLE TO HAVE A CONFIRMATION TEST:**

#### **Notes from the Early Days of Pandemic Announcement**

**APRIL 27, 2020**

Today marks my Day 15 from possible exposure of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). I am a licensed pharmacist and a resident of Quezon City, which is currently the place with the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the Philippines as of this date. I would like to focus this account on my experience of COVID-19 symptoms.

From Day 1 of possible exposure, I began to feel coldness at my back, mild headache, non-persistent dry cough, muscle pain, and a diarrhea-like feeling. At first, I was in denial, since the symptoms are showing too soon and summer had just arrived and could be due to the change in weather. I have not disregarded the fact that it could be COVID-19. The symptoms I was experiencing matched those described by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other health agencies, particularly the Department of Health (DOH). Hence, I've opted to observe myself for the next day and conduct basic home remedies like drinking plenty of water, the classic "Salabat," enough sleep, and avoiding the news since it could give me a negative impact and additional fear. The 2<sup>nd</sup> day, I had dry cough again and a diarrhea-like feeling. At Day 3, aside from dry cough, I had had a fever, which I could not rule out since I had no thermometer and self-diagnosing my own fever was unreliable. Day 4 and Day 5 were plainly dry cough, but Days 3 and 4 were the worst days for dry cough. And I began to notice that I could have dysphagia (difficulty of swallowing), which had been manifesting even before the pandemic but it got recently worse, and a grain of rice got stuck in my throat, making me wonder if the dry cough that I had been experiencing might be caused by the trapped food that I suspected might have gone to my left lung, or it really was COVID-19. This had been another theory of cause aside from the change in weather. But I had muscle aches and all, which still led me to possible COVID-19.

For Day 6, with dry cough, possible fever, muscle ache accompanied by weakness, runny nose, and swollen throat, I now opted to call the Department of Health (DOH) COVID-19 hotline. It was past 4 o'clock in the morning. I was aware that my symptoms were mild but I have already started to panic and decided to look for other professional opinions. At the moment I wanted to get tested, which I knew it was impossible based on the DOH's algorithm. The country is still adjusting to the current situation and the government is beginning its expanded coronavirus testing program. During this time, severe cases are the priority to get tested and those with mild symptoms are advised to self-quarantine, which I did. But I wanted to get tested not only for self-reassurance but also, so I could plan ahead and avoid spreading the disease. A female voice from DOH hotline answered my call but she transferred the call to another person who can further answer my queries. I think she did that because I had been mentioning technical medical terms which made me believe she was not a healthcare provider. I was a bit disappointed because I was expecting a professional person to answer the call. So I waited while the call was being transferred and it took ages before I got to hear another female voice. She began asking how she could help, so I started sharing my symptoms and asked if I could get tested. She had the same assessment as mine, that what I could do was to home-quarantine,

Teresa Bandiola  
April 27, 2020

which I have been doing. At the end of the call, at least, I managed to ask for her first name to give me the feeling that I have established a connection inside and would give me more confidence in case I needed to make another call. I didn't get to know if she was a doctor, but I wasn't satisfied with her answers. It's not because of her saying, "No, you can't," to my request of getting a COVID-19 test to assure myself if I was truly infected or not. I understood the DOH's algorithm. But at that point, I was at the verge of breaking down. I simply needed outside help, a beacon of light. Her response was lacking empathy, devoid of fighting spirit, saying to me that the disease is progressive. Okay, I get that, but at that point I needed something that could give me hope and cheer my spirit up. At that point, I didn't know if I were about to face the worse.

I tried to calm myself down when the call ended. I tried my hardest to pull myself together and be my own doctor and cheerleader at the same time. After all, I am a pharmacist. And I should know better.

In those moments, when I was alone self-quarantining and experiencing the symptoms, with not enough nutritious food to combat the disease more effectively because of the fear that I might infect others (e.g., when I go out for a grocery or ask my friends drop food at my doorstep), prayer was my best weapon.

On top of it all, I am still privileged that I was able to self-quarantine and was not sent to a centralized quarantine with other suspected cases, and that it was only mild. I was not alone. Truly God is with me the whole time.