

“Ang Rayuma ko sa Panahon ng COVID Pandemiya”: a Virtual PEARL Forum



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The global pandemic brought about by the COVID-19 virus has changed the world and the way we work, rest and play. The social distancing and stay-at-home orders have wreaked havoc on patients needing face-to-face encounters, as well as organizations that rely on events to build connections and spread awareness. However, one silver lining from the pandemic brought is that innovation and creativity are emerging at a rapid pace as organizations begin to adapt and see their future through an entirely different lens. The People Empowerment for Arthritis and Lupus (PEARL), in partnership with the Section of Rheumatology of St Luke's Medical Center, have pivoted and utilized technology and creativity to connect with patients and partners by conducting their first ever virtual lay forum. To continue their advocacy of patient education and participation, the virtual lay forum entitled *“Ang Rayuma ko sa Panahon ng COVID Pandemiya”* was conducted in August 16, 2020 via an online platform. It was attended by a total of 65 participants composed of rheumatology patients, supporters, and rheumatology consultants.

The activity was introduced with a prayer by Dr. Patricia Velasco in thanksgiving for the launch of the virtual forum and the chance to get together despite the conditions of the pandemic. It was followed by the opening remarks by Dr. Juan Javier Lichauco, present president of the Philippine Rheumatology Association, addressing the current issues that rheumatology patients face during the pandemic and assuring them of the steps that the association is taking to assist them.

The forum proper started with the presentation of the results of the survey answered by the attendees. Most of the attendees were elderly, aged 61 to 70 years old, most of them diagnosed of rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, lupus, and osteoporosis. It was emphasized that their age and maintenance medications put them at risk for acquiring infections, hence advising them to practice safety measures of staying at home, wearing masks, and hand hygiene.



Dr. Juan Javier Lichauco giving his opening remarks



Dr. Bryan Perez leading the interactive discussion

An interactive discussion tackled the top five challenges that patients in attendance experienced during the pandemic. This included difficulty of having diagnostics done because of transportation limitations and quarantine regulations, missing their regular check-ups, and difficulty purchasing maintenance medications not only because of logistics, but also because of low stocks in pharmacies. The lecture given by Dr. Bryan Perez highlighted key points that will alert the patients of a possible flare of their autoimmune disease, which will warrant an urgent consult with a nearest doctor. The use of teleconsultations was encouraged for non-emergent complaints. Regarding medications, patients were advised to purchase a month's supply of their medications, especially because of the dynamic quarantine regulations. They may also maximize their stocks by taking half of the dose until stocks are replenished. Another challenge posed to the participants was losing their jobs and income due to lay-offs. Indeed, the unemployment rate in the Philippines rose to about 17.7% by April 2020, according to the Philippine Statistics

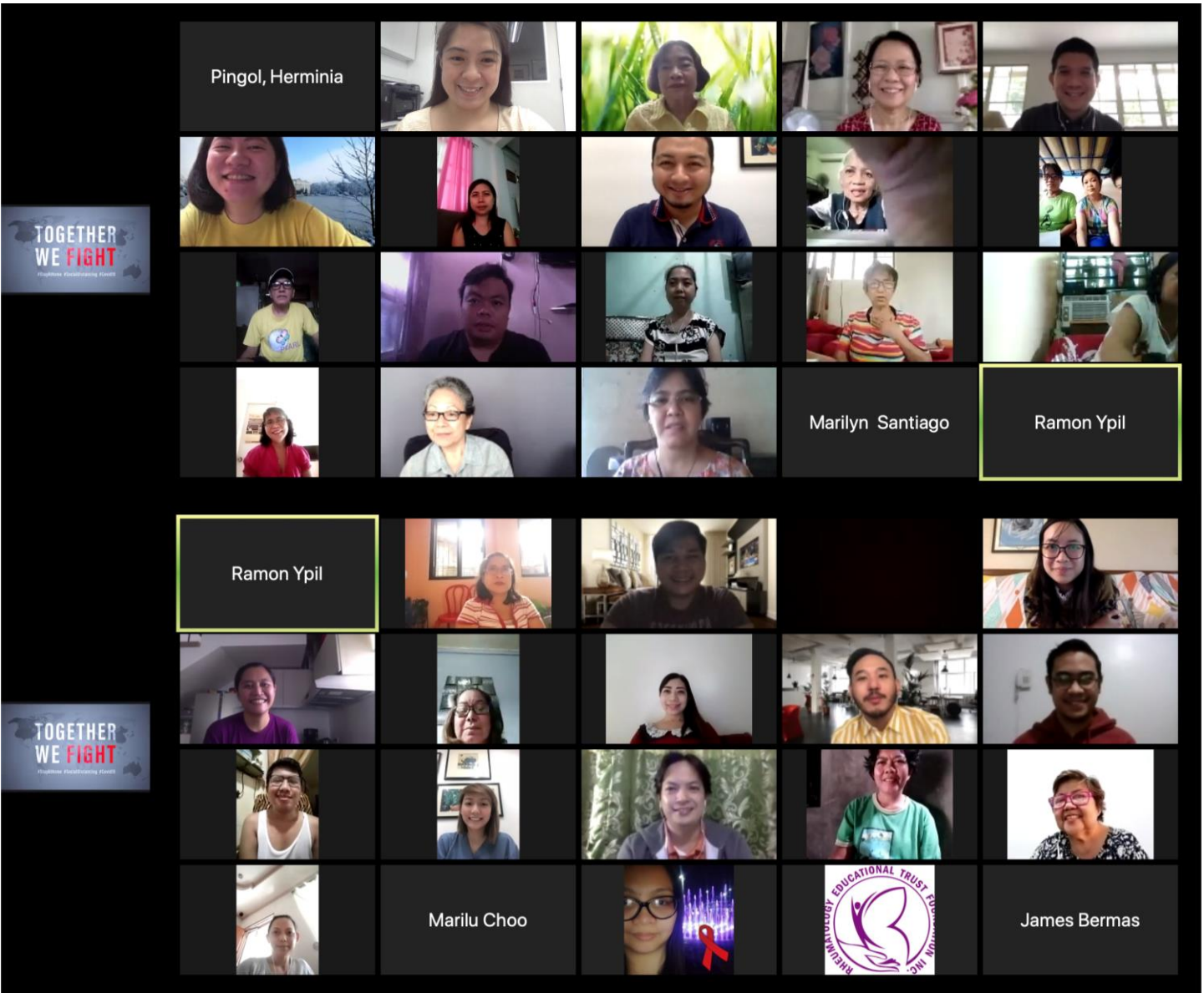
Authority. While this is an unfortunate statistic, the participants were given ideas on methods of earning while on quarantine. These included, but were not limited to, starting online food and products businesses, safe online investments, and vlogging. Most of the participants had queries regarding their risk of acquiring the COVID-19 infection. In the lecture, it was discussed that the maintenance medications needed in autoimmune diseases make them immunocompromised, but not their disease itself. However, medications especially steroids, must not be abruptly stopped, but instead be maintained on low dose. Common symptoms of COVID-19 infection were tackled and participants were briefed on the quarantine procedures once with symptoms. The program was concluded by a message from Dr. Sandra Navarra, thanking all the participants and organizers of the activity, emphasizing that the forum as a quarterly gathering is an instrument to improve patient outcomes and create a support system especially during this global crisis.

The over-all program was spearheaded by Dr. Jonathan Consignado and Dr. Sandra Navarra, assisted by the Rheumatology fellows from St. Lukes Medical Center, with master of ceremonies Dr. Anthea Tan. The success of the activity is also credited to the invaluable staff and patient partners for their support – Ma'am Elyn, Ma'am Zeny, Ma'am Robelle, Sir Virgilio, Ma'am Eloisa, and other supporters. The organizers are looking forward to the next virtual lay forum in October 2020.



Dr. Sandra Navarra closing the program

PHOTO GALLERY OF THE PARTICIPANTS:





 <p>Pingol, Herminia</p>	 <p>Karla Sofia Reyes</p>	 <p>Patricia Velasco</p>	 <p>Sandra Navarra</p>
 <p>Juan Lichauco</p>	 <p>Anthea Tan</p>	 <p>Rowena "Weng" Es...</p>	 <p>Bryan Perez</p>
 <p>Zeny Estrada</p>	 <p>Mercy Frias</p>	 <p>Virgilio Ganigan</p>	 <p>Rheumatology Cen...</p>
 <p>Eloisa Aguinaldo</p>	 <p>Arlene Garais</p>	 <p>Danilyn Torres-Mo...</p>	 <p>Zeny C Zablan</p>