

EDITORIAL

Such impunity

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Tipped off about medical wastes clogging the drainage of a Makati building, police on Tuesday swooped down on another underground and unlicensed medical facility apparently being used to treat Chinese patients afflicted with COVID-19.

As in a similar raid on an underground hospital in Parañaque last month, police found treatment beds, syringes, machines, and equipment for coronavirus testing, and some Chinese nationals awaiting treatment. In both instances, the medical facilities had no business permit, and the Chinese doctors no license to practice medicine in the country.

Authorities also discovered a pharmacy inside the Parañaque establishment where unregistered medicines labeled in Chinese characters were found.

Some of the medicines were for sexually transmitted diseases, leading the police to surmise that the medication could possibly be part of a sex trafficking operation, with workers from nearby Philippine offshore gaming operators (Pogos) as main clients.

Soon after, two Chinese citizens were arrested in Cavite after a raid on a warehouse netted some P10 million worth of Chinese medicine not registered with the Food and Drug Administration.

Police said they were looking into the possibility that the warehouse supplied the medications found at the Parañaque underground

hospital.

But the biggest police haul was last week's discovery of a secret Chinese clinic at the Fontana Leisure Park in Clark, Pampanga. The seven-bed clandestine facility was supposedly put up to exclusively treat Chinese workers suffering from COVID-19.

A Fontana official later issued a statement denying the company's involvement in the clinic. But the more salient disclosure in the letter was that the Chinese nationals operating the facility were "released on the same day of their arrest on May 19, with no charges filed against them."

Unbelievable. But first—if illegal Chinese clinics are being discovered one after the other, just how many more are operating clandestinely out there?

And if these facilities have proliferated to this degree, doesn't that indicate the presence of a large number of Chinese nationals in the country who are sick of the virus and, perhaps distrustful of availing themselves of treatment in a regular hospital where their case would be recorded, would rather check into an illegal clinic set up by their compatriots?

Who are these Chinese nationals, and which companies are they connected with that would warrant their presence in the country at this time?

A more troubling question involves Philippine health officials: Why has it been so easy to test the Chinese nationals found in the resort hospital—using the country's limited test kits and health workers—when the health department has been dragging its feet in testing the

rest of us?

Until they were discovered, the unsanctioned medical facilities also meant that infected Chinese patients were not being reported to health authorities and, instead of being quarantined to contain the virus, could easily be spreading the disease.

In another recent incident at the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA), the Pogo firm Ekximum, Inc. refused entry to the SBMA's inspection team, which had been sent to conduct inspections to check the company's compliance with quarantine protocols and to see if it had ceased operations as ordered by the government amid the pandemic.

Such impunity. Where do these foreign nationals get off brazenly flouting our laws?

The answer is in that revealing Fontana letter: The erring Chinese nationals were "released on the same day of their arrest on May 19, with no charges filed against them."

Contrast that stunning leniency with the high price ordinary Filipinos have to pay for the slightest misdemeanor. Fish vendor Joseph Jimeda, for instance, was arrested and detained for 12 days—two days more than the penalty for his offense—for "simple disobedience" to quarantine rules in Navotas.

These underground, dangerously unregulated hospitals and the brash Chinese nationals behind them are, however, only part of a bigger headache—the Pogo industry. On May 14, police raided an unregistered Pogo firm in Las Piñas; 265 Chinese workers were rounded up.

Add that criminal enterprise to the social ills that have come to be associated with the growth of the sector, from kidnapping and murder to prostitution and human trafficking.

The aboveboard Pogo companies, on the other hand? None of them can yet resume operations, according to Internal Revenue Deputy Commissioner and Pogo task force head Arnel S.D. Guballa, because “They are still in the process of complying with the requirements, including payments.”

In other words, as of this time, not one of the 60 or so licensed Pogos (or any of their service providers, per the Bureau of Internal Revenue) has fully settled their tax obligations.