

# PROBLEMS IN THE COLLECTION OF BIRTH AND DEATH STATISTICS IN THE PHILIPPINES

*By*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

There are at least two major problems in the collection of vital statistics in the Philippines; namely,

1. Incomplete birth registration, and
2. Unreliable cause-of-death statistics.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the factors which contribute to these problems and to consider remedial measures.

## II. INCOMPLETE BIRTH REGISTRATION

1. The majority of births are not attended by physicians, nurses, or licensed midwives. While physicians, nurses and licensed midwives will as a rule report births, unlicensed midwives and parents are likely to neglect registration of newly born babies.
2. Since completeness of birth registration in the Philippines depends to a large extent on parental action, ignorance on the part of many parents regarding the need for birth registration contributes appreciably to the problem of incomplete registration.
3. In the Philippines, birth registration is not frequently utilized as a prerequisite to the enjoyment of social benefits; hence, very few realize the practical necessity of birth registration. A certified copy of the birth certificate is, for example, not universally required by public and private schools when a child enrolls in the first grade. Neither is it routinely required of persons who register as voters or who secure residence

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certificates for the first time, or of persons who apply for a marriage license.

4. The remoteness and inaccessibility of certain barrios is often cited as a contributory factor.
5. Among non-Christians, registration of births and deaths is negligible.
6. The present registration system is not conducive to completeness of birth reporting. Municipal treasurers who serve as local civil registrars have no incentive whatsoever in so far as improving birth reporting is concerned. They are neither given any remuneration for their work as civil registrars nor are they effectively supervised in the discharge of their registration duties. Evidence of lack of interest on the part of municipal treasurers is the observation that, yearly, from 20 to 30 per cent of treasurers fail to submit to the Director of the Census and Statistics reports on births and deaths that have already been registered in their respective municipalities. Certainly, the treasurers cannot be expected to exert efforts in order to discover and record unreported births. It may be mentioned, in passing, that while local civil registrars are, by law, under the direction and supervision of the Director of the Census and Statistics, the director is rarely in a position to institute proper disciplinary action against negligent civil registrars.

### III. UNRELIABLE CAUSE-OF-DEATH STATISTICS

1. The majority of deaths in the Philippines are without medical attendance. In such instances, certification of the cause of death is usually made by the local health officer on the basis of information secured from the family. Autopsies are rarely performed.
2. Not all deaths without medical attendance are actually seen and investigated by the local health officer. Oftentimes, the sanitary inspector undertakes the investigation, the health officer basing his diagnosis on

the report of the sanitary inspector. Furthermore, the Administrative Code not only allows but makes it a duty of the municipal mayor, municipal secretary, or municipal councilor to issue a death certificate in the absence of a physician in attendance and of the local health officer.

3. Not all deaths with medical attendance are certified by the attending physicians. For various reasons, attending physicians would rather refer the family of the deceased to the local health officer for the required death certificate.
4. Whether deaths are certified by physicians in attendance or by local health officers, inaccuracies regarding the cause of death arise as a result of sheer carelessness, limited diagnostic facilities, reluctance to reveal medical information prejudicial to family prestige, or lack of familiarity with the rules of certification, definitions and nomenclature of causes of death.

#### IV. IMPROVING COLLECTION OF BIRTH AND DEATH STATISTICS

1. Transfer the responsibility for the collection of birth and death statistics to the Department of Health; municipal and city treasurers to continue registering marriages, divorces, annulment of marriages, adoptions, etc.
  - a. At the national level, establish an Office of Public Health Statistics under the Department of Health to compile and analyze statistics on births, deaths, sickness, accidents and other data of public health importance; to supply the Bureau of the Census and Statistics with pertinent data; to provide public health statistical information and guidance to official and voluntary health agencies in the country; and to maintain liaison with the World Health Organization and other international health statistical services.

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- b. At the provincial and city level, the provincial and city health officers are to be responsible for the compilation and analysis of birth, death and other public health statistics in their respective provinces and cities.
- c. At the municipal level, establish in each municipality a municipal health team headed by a municipal health officer. The municipal health officer is to be responsible for the collection of birth, death, and other public health statistics in his town.
- d. At the barrio level, the *teniente del barrio* is to be utilized for the prompt and complete reporting to the municipal health officer of births, deaths, sickness and accidents.

### *Advantages:*

- a. Since the national and the local health departments are the agencies which make the most use of birth and death statistics in defining community health problems, these agencies are interested in improving birth and death registration.
  - b. Lines of authority and responsibility will be better defined, supervision can be made more effective, and disciplinary action can readily be instituted.
  - c. More profitable relations can be established with statistical services of international health organizations.
  - d. With a health officer in every municipality, issuance of death certificates by non-medical persons can be done away with.
2. Carry out an educational program under the leadership of the Department of Health for the improvement of birth and death registration.

- a. Emphasize in courses of public health offered to medical students the need for proper certification of causes of death, the duty of attending physicians to issue death certificates, and the rules of certification.
- b. Include public health statistics in courses of public health offered to nursing students as well as to other students who later on might become members of the health team.
- c. Distribute manuals on birth and death certification and copies of the Manual of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases, Injuries, and Causes of Death to all government physicians, and thru the various medical societies and the Board of Medical Examiners, to all medical practitioners in the country.
- d. Seek the cooperation of medical practitioners — national health officials to deal with national medical associations, provincial health officers with provincial medical societies, and municipal health officers with local practising physicians.
- e. Seek the cooperation of the Department of Education at the national level, the division superintendents at the provincial level, and the principals and head teachers at the local level, to the end that birth certificates be universally required for enrolment in the first primary grade.
- f. Seek the cooperation of parish priests and ministers to the end that birth registration be made prerequisite to baptism.
- g. Educate parents regarding the need for reporting of births and seeking medical attendance during illness, utilizing the local health personnel, the teachers of community-centered schools, the volunteer workers of the rural improvement service and rural reconstruction movement, the parish priests

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and ministers, the *teniente del barrio*, and various other resources and media of communication.

- h. Develop a group of public health statisticians by providing technical training in public health statistical work to undergraduate and graduate students of public health as well as to health personnel already in the health service.
3. Revise the form of the birth and death certificates presently being used in the Philippines in conformity with the recommendations of the World Health Organization. Design a separate certificate for stillbirths.

