

Is healthcare a human right or just big business?

Against seemingly impossible odds, US President Barack Obama achieved a major milestone by pushing his healthcare reform bill through. At least 32 million Americans soon to be covered by insurance are applauding the new legislation. The people who fought the changes tooth and nail are those who would have liked these millions of underprivileged left unprotected, in the richest country in the world. That these new privileges have only helped American citizens come one step closer to health benefits enjoyed for decades in other developed countries is an irony lost upon the doomsayers. Poor misers, some of these rich folk.

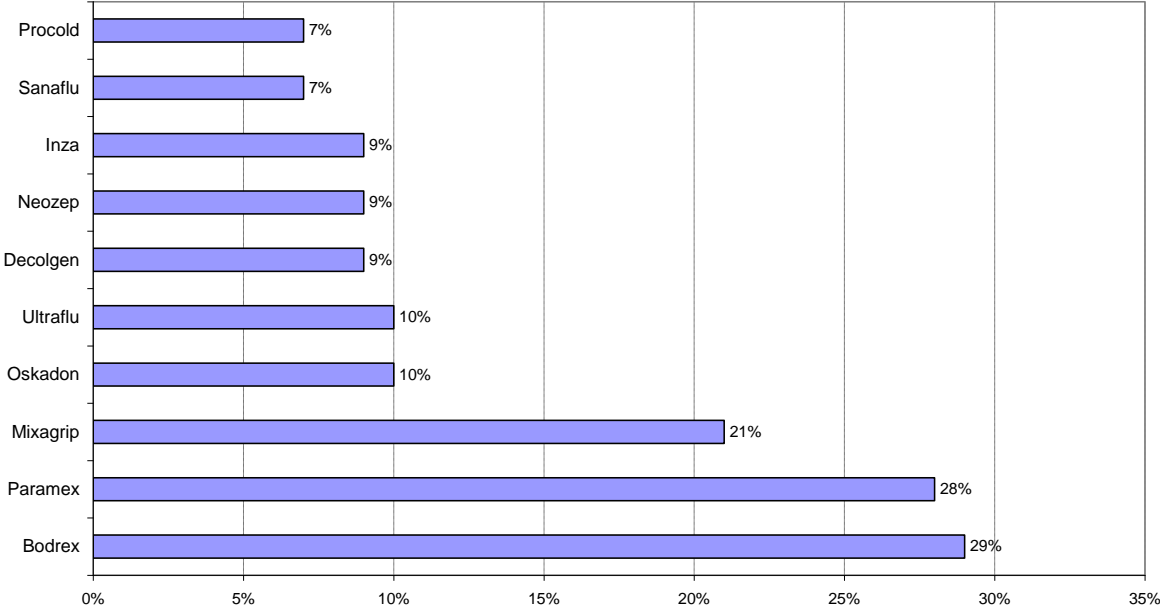
Not too far away, Brazilian President Lula Da Silva continues to enjoy an approval rating of over 80 per cent, celebrated by rich and poor alike. An erstwhile trade union leader, he is living proof that an intelligent balance can indeed be found between the competing ideologies of Right and Left. Free enterprise and social justice can work together, even in a developing country, let alone a rich one. All it takes is the ability to see the difference between right and wrong.

In Indonesia, healthcare is not a major election issue. That's because 84 per cent of the population believes "I am feeling well and in good health". To boot, 74 per cent of the people are convinced that "If I had an accident, the local hospital would provide me with adequate treatment". Add both together and you know why there is no heat from the voter on this fundamental issue. Not yet, that is. But perceptions, even expectations, can change. If the powers that be are lulled into believing that all is well, these findings will become a disservice to Indonesia.

Of the ten opinions measured on health and fitness across the country constantly, "I worry about dengue fever" ranks No.1 with 71 per cent agreeing. This is down from 74 per cent in recent years. There is a visible and gradual growth of people who "try to buy additive-free food", presently 69 per cent. Are the purveyors of MSG listening? Surprisingly, the number of people who "try to get enough calcium in my diet" has declined in the last five years from a high 71 per cent to a still relatively high 64 at the end of 2009.

"I'm eating less red meat these days" remains steady at around 60 per cent in recent years. What has climbed rather dramatically, from 43 per cent in 2005 to 48 per cent today, is the conscious choice of "a low fat diet is a way of life for me". But there are two major worrying signs for Indonesia's healthcare providers. "I'm concerned about my cholesterol level" has dropped from 52 per cent of the population in 2005 to 42 per cent today. That negative trend is compounded by the even more alarming dip in "I love to do as many sports as possible". That indicator has crashed in just five years from 41 per cent in 2005 to only 28 per cent as at December 2009. If this is a sign of economic progress, that is one luxury the country can do without. Shedding some light in the change of attitudes is the decline in the number of people who "would like to be able to lose weight", down from 41 per cent five years ago to 34 now. Quite conveniently, the 36 per cent who used to believe that "health food is not necessary if you eat properly" has climbed to 38 per cent today. The calorie-conscious remains steady at around 42 per cent of the population.

**BRANDS OF ANALGESIC, PAIN RELIEF AND FLU MEDICINE BOUGHT
IN LAST 4 WEEKS**



But Indonesia continues to improve its Body Mass Index, the ratio of weight to height. The percentage of people in the “acceptable weight” range has climbed to 79 per cent, “overweight” has dropped from 13 to 9 per cent, “underweight” from 12 to 10 and “obese” from 1.3 to just 0.7 per cent of the population. When compared to Americans and Australians in particular, the first and second fattest people on the planet, all Indonesians deserve to take a collective bow.

Despite the good news, healthcare is increasingly very big business today. The growth in the number of hospitals, nursing homes and clinics both public and private are visible signs across metro Indonesia. In tandem, self-medication for minor ailments continues to generate growth in both volume and profits. The analgesic, pain relief and flu medicine categories for example, grow significantly in both users and usage, year to year. These are multi-trillion rupiah industries, providing both comfort and employment. As incomes grow and work pressures heighten, the OTC drugs sector will hurtle forward even faster in the years ahead. What will please many a proud Indonesian is the fact that local brands continue to dominate many categories that have seen multinational entrants in recent years. Bodrex rules, in a category that features Indonesian brands ranked from No.1 to No.10. No mean achievement, in a highly competitive, heavily cluttered market.

These conclusions are based on Roy Morgan Single Source, a syndicated survey with over 24,000 Indonesians 14 years and older interviewed each year. That national database is updated every quarter. It is used by a host of major industries, marketers and agencies.

The writer can be contacted at Debnath.Guharoy@roymorgan.com