

# 13<sup>th</sup> MASEAN Conference Vientiane, Laos

By Dr Tan Yia Swam, Deputy Editor

The 13<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Medical Association of South East Asian Nations (MASEAN) was held in Vientiane, Laos, from 13 to 15 November 2008. This year's conference was hosted by the Lao Medical Association. Our delegates comprised Dr Chong Yeh Woei, Dr Tammy Chan, myself, and two of our secretariat staff, Miss Krysania Tan and Miss Gracia Ong, who have also been serving as the MASEAN secretariat over the past year.

It was my first visit to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Our hosts had chosen Lane Xang Hotel for the event, which was built in the 1960s and steeped in local history. The hotel staff were warm and friendly, and the ambience of the place was unique.

On the first night, there was an informal welcome dinner by the poolside. The wonderfully spicy food served helped to keep us warm in the crisp cool air, all the while bathed in brilliant moonlight. The delegates who had arrived had a chance to mingle – to renew old friendships and make new ones. It was delightful meeting some of these senior colleagues whom I have met before in Kuching earlier this year at the Malaysian Medical Association's Annual Banquet.

The conference started proper the next day, with an opening ceremony, at which welcome addresses were given by the President of the Laos Medical Association, Dr Khamphay Rasmy, the outgoing MASEAN Chairman Datuk Dr Teoh Siang Chin and the incoming MASEAN Chairman Prof Somphone Phounsavath, who is also President-Elect of the Laos Medical Association. Of note, this meeting marked the first at which we were joined by the Brunei Medical Association, which was officially launched on 2 November 2008, so everyone was pleased to have a full representation of the ASEAN countries. What struck us was the absence of delegates from Cambodia for the second year running, and those of us present requested the secretariat to contact the association to express our concern and offer any form of help that may be required.

All the attending countries gave a short presentation on community medicine in their respective countries. It was interesting and enlightening to hear about the

facts and problems facing large countries; especially countries made up of islands such as Indonesia and Philippines, and countries with varying geographical features such as mountainous regions, where a significant proportion of their population stay in remote villages. Those of us practising in Singapore are perhaps pampered by the convenience provided by the efficient infrastructure inherent in a small country. Making housecalls is no joke when you need to cross rivers and climb mountains, and when you arrive, you are really the only help the patient has!

The official dinner was held that night, and we were honoured by the presence of the Minister of Health of Laos, Dr Pommek Dala. The entertainment was interesting, with special cultural dances and performances by local artistes, and eventually the stage was taken over by some of the delegates who serenaded their fellow doctors who were present.

The last day of the conference continued with country reports. Myanmar shared a firsthand account of their experience with Cyclone Nargis, highlighting the local response for aid, followed by the help rendered by international volunteers. The conference delegates agreed to look into sponsorship, and the setting up of a MASEAN fund, which may be used to help any ASEAN country in need, in the event of such natural disasters.

The meeting ended with a closing ceremony and exchange of gifts, after which our kind host brought the delegates out on a city tour. We visited some of the famous landmarks in the capital, and partook of the delicious local fare. Vientiane is a beautiful city, with an integration of the old and new. The juxtaposition of a modern day shop next to a centuries-old temple was surreal. One could walk down a road with cars, tuk-tuks and motorcycles zooming past, only to turn a corner and find oneself in a secret alcove, surrounded by ancient statues where the air is so still and serene, unbroken by city sounds.

In all, it was a successful conference, and a meeting of old friends. The SMA thanks the Lao Medical Association for hosting this event, and looks forward to the next meeting in Manila next year. ■



Singaporean delegates at the Masean conference, (L-R) Dr Tammy Chan, Gracia Ong, Dr Tan Yia Swam, Krysania Tan and Dr Chong Yeh Woei.