



1st International Summit on Tobacco Control in Asia and Oceania Region 2010

By Gracia Ong and Dr Bertha Woon

The inaugural summit on tobacco control in Asia and Oceania region took place in Sampran, Nakorn Pathom province, Thailand, from 25 to 27 February 2010. SMA's representative Dr Bertha Woon, and delegates from 11 other National Medical Associations (NMAs) gathered on this occasion to forge a regional stand on tobacco cessation and to promote a smoke-free society.

The delegates were put up at the Rose Garden Riverside Hotel by the bank of the Ta Chine River. Looking out over the idyllic river in the early morning over breakfast – as a saffron-robed monk paddles downriver for alms, soft morning glow tinting the water's surface – is a rare pleasure for today's harried city dwellers. The hospitality demonstrated from our hosts Medical Association of Thailand (MAT) was nothing short of exemplary. This meeting also afforded a chance to

meet up with old friends Dr Wonchat Subhachaturas and Prof Somsri Pausawasdi, the Chairperson of the Thai Health Profession Alliance Against Tobacco (THAAT).

This summit highlighted the role of the medical profession, especially in Asia and Oceania region in combating the scourge of tobacco, and culminated in 12 nations agreeing to sign the finalised draft

Confederate of Medical Associations in Asia and Oceania (CMAAO) statement on Asia Oceania Medical Profession and Tobacco Control. This statement is to be presented nationally and beyond to encourage smoking cessation. Each NMA delegate presented reports on the tobacco situation in their home country, and these revealed varying degrees of severity.





1. *Dinner on board a cruise down the Ta Chine River.*
2. *Parade of the delegates*
3. *Dr Tran Huu Trang signing the Rose Garden Sampran Declaration*

expenditure as a whole. However, it was agreed that this is not the main issue, as the addition of chemicals to make cigarettes more addictive would obviate any benefits obtained from decreasing tar and nicotine limits. In addition, Dr Wen Chi Pang of the Taiwan Medical Association noted that “light” or “mild” cigarettes were no less harmful than the regular variety, but instead led smokers to inhale deeper and longer. He recommended that sale of such cigarettes should be prohibited, as is the current situation in Europe.

Challenges faced by NMAs include the lack of nicotine replacement therapy and free or freely available quitting services or programmes. Countries with large geographical areas may find it difficult to enforce legislation on underaged smokers. Dr Tran Huu Trang of the Vietnam Medical Association pointed out that minority populations in rural areas resist change as they consider smoking their right.

However, the medical profession can do much to help, as it has the trust of the people and the media, and should take every opportunity to effect change on the individual, professional and societal levels. As such, the draft CMAAO statement emphasised that as the majority of the world’s smokers are in Asia, doctors here have a crucial role to play. For example, NMAs can develop,

Each delegate presented a report on his/her home country’s tobacco control status. Prof F. A. Moeloek of the Indonesian Medical Association revealed worrisome data illustrating that among the rural population, there was a greater allocation of household expenditure for cigarettes than food. On the other hand, Dr Alvin Chan from the Hong Kong Medical Association demonstrated a low national smoking rate of 14%, and attributed the results to successful education on smoking in schools. Singapore’s results in smoking cessation were hailed by the other NMAs as exemplary, particularly the strong efforts by the Ministry of Health as well as Health Promotion Board. The only worrying trend to take note of was the increased rates of smoking among young women and youths in Singapore.

revenue loss derived from heightened tobacco control would be much less than savings in the nation’s healthcare expenditure. Prof Saranatra Waikakul of the MAT also emphasised the importance of connecting to smokers in a way that they could understand. For example, young smokers are nonchalant about their risks of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, but may be more concerned about stunted growth and subfertility.

The proposed amendment to the Smoking (Control of Advertisements and Sale of Tobacco) Act in Singapore includes lowering of maximum tar and nicotine limits. This would result in cigarettes becoming more expensive to produce, and the need to smoke more to achieve the same “high”, raising overall



support and participate in public education drives, prohibit smoking at NMA meetings, refuse funding from tobacco companies and become spokespersons for tobacco cessation. It is indeed heartening to note that such an effort can positively affect the health of close to 4 billion people in the region.

Following the finalisation of the draft statement and the adoption of the Rose Garden Sampran declaration, delegates were treated to a visit to the Nakorn Pathom Great Pagoda and Siam Cultural Park. The pagoda, referred to as Phra Pathom Chedi by the locals, stands as the tallest stupa in the world at an impressive 127 metres. It also attracts numerous devotees each day, who flock to offer incense and affix squares of gold leaf onto the images of Buddha.

The Wax Museum, housed in the Siam Cultural Park at Ratchburi featured life-sized wax and fiberglass images of famous personalities such as Ho Chi Minh and Mother Theresa. The wax figures were extraordinarily life-like and detailed, down to the liver spots meticulously freckled onto their forearms. The large park also contained a wealth of cultural, historical and religious attractions. Most notable were three large statues of Buddha, each smiling benevolently, from the Chiang Saen, Sukothai and Ayuthaya periods.

On the last day, delegates visited the Damnoen Saduak floating market where hundreds of wooden boats, each belching fumes above the engine's roar, clogged the narrow waterway. Any fear of the boats capsizing was quickly removed by

the realisation that each vessel was too closely wedged to the next, to allow for tilting room. It was fascinating: vendors hawking all manner of goods ranging from grilled bananas to counterfeit bags, amid the raucous bargaining by calculator-brandishing tourists. Yet another note-worthy sight emerged when the normally sedate doctors decided to clamber up a two-storey tall coconut tree by way of a rickety bamboo "ladder" for photographs.

It was indeed a fun and fruitful trip, culminating in the important outcome of finalising the draft CMAAO statement. We cannot thank the organising committee and hosts, MAT, enough for providing such an enjoyable experience, and hope to reciprocate their kind hospitality in the future. SMA

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