

ActivAid 2010 - A Humanitarian Affairs Conference

By Kanneganti Abhiram

"Oh no. Not another humanitarian project to Country X," I grumble quietly, beyond earshot of my more humanitarian friends.

The area outside our lecture theatres is frequently colonised by a variety of NUS student societies raising funds for overseas humanitarian trips. After entering medical school, having convinced my interviewers about some "Miss-Universe"-esque desire to save humanity, it might surprise some to know that I have long been a sceptic of student-led humanitarian trips, having been on a few myself.

I have often pondered the effectiveness of these trips, hoping they were not borne out of a "White Man's Burden" so foretold in Rudyard Kipling's controversial poem on colonialism where the rich feel a moral obligation to impose help on those deemed to be less fortunate by their standards. With the medical students of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM) embarking on an ever increasing number of humanitarian trips, a group of Singaporean medical students studying in NUS and the UK felt a need to do something to ensure that our programmes did not follow the trend of "voluntourism". Instead, we wanted to help our colleagues find ways to improve upon sustainability by identifying and fulfilling needs while utilising a community's innate ability to help itself; the proverbial "teaching a man to fish".

The NUS Medical Society is the student body for YLLSoM. As its Academic Affairs Director, one of my roles is to organise talks that broaden the minds of our students in medical issues beyond those covered in the curriculum. Enter Healthcare Expeditions, a secular, student-based, non-governmental organisation involved in enabling sustainable projects where healthcare students can effectively care for the underprivileged. Although based in Singapore, participants hail from several countries including the UK and Australia.

Over a capitalistic cup of Starbucks' coffee, we quickly found partners in each other over this issue. We felt that we needed a platform for healthcare humanitarian workers to discuss their experiences with students. With Healthcare Expedition's experience in humanitarian work and the Medical Society's organising capability, we came up with a conference, ActivAid 2010. It had the ambitious goals of revolutionising the way healthcare students thought about their expeditions and providing networking opportunities for like-minded individuals for future synergistic work. In that vein, we invited our fellow healthcare cousins in NUS Pharmacy, Nursing and Dentistry, as well as the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School as we felt that greater collaboration would infuse new ideas and bring about new skill sets. Aptly themed "Sustainability Issues Facing Student Volunteers", we boldly set forth on this novel conference with encouraging results.

We organised the conference on 4 September 2010 with 120 participants, adopting a 3-pronged approach:

- Three keynote speeches broadly encompassing aspects of social entrepreneurship, disaster relief and student involvement in projects. These speeches were kept general and set the tone for the day;
- Students could choose a mixture of 3 out of 15 workshop topics which were facilitated by humanitarian workers to discuss certain aspects of humanitarian work and share reflections;
- Exhibition booths were set up by a variety of humanitarian non-



Discussion between participants during an interactive session.

governmental organisations and by student projects for discussion and networking over lunch and tea.

Feedback for the talks was great, hopefully not just because of the frequent breaks amply supplied with good food. The food was good brain fuel for the students to reflect on what they had gained from these talks, be it inspiration for their humanitarian projects or impetus for a new one.

"It is a forward-looking conference," declared Dr Goh Wei Leong, one of the workshop facilitators, "You guys are looking at sustainability and no longer one-off projects."

Ravi Cutillan, a Year Two medical student found it "nice to see different perspectives and what different people are doing. It gives a lot of ideas to improve existing projects." Many more participants concluded the conference wishing they had known these valuable lessons before going on previous expeditions.

We found the atmosphere positive, with ample discussions between participants and facilitators. The facilitators themselves found it useful networking with each other. ActivAid 2010 came off well for a first attempt and achieved its primary goal of collating best practices for healthcare students to learn from. The booths, the variety of workshops and the choice of keynote speeches were generally well received.

With some luck, ActivAid will help cultivate a generation of healthcare professionals who can marry the desire to help with wisdom. We hope everyone takes home the message that Wee Jia Yan, a Year Four medical student, learned, "Charity is not simply about helping the poor, but respecting them as fellow human beings; to help them but not rob them of their dignity."

To learn more about ActivAid 2010, you may visit the registration page at www.activaid2010.wordpress.com.

There is plenty of room for improvement. ActivAid 2011 is already in the works and we have a strong desire to expand to other faculties. For example, we appreciate that engineering know-how is invaluable in projects looking into improving sanitation infrastructure as part of primary prevention. We hope to involve more non-medical humanitarian speakers to speak on vital support roles such as logistics and maintaining relationships with communities and officials. ActivAid 2011 will be held on 27 August 2011. Kindly contact our Conference Directors Ng Ming Wei (ng_mingwei@hotmail.com) or Cheong Lianne (cheong.lianne@gmail.com) if you have any suggestions, speaker recommendations or if you wish to support ActivAid 2011 in any way.

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