

By Dr Bertha Woon



Class photo of the first WMA-INSEAD

SMA Foreign Affairs

The Singapore Medical Association is a member of the World Medical Association. In 2007, Pfizer's Dr Soeren Rasmussen (Danish gastroenterologist) and ex-WMA President Dr Yank Coble from the USA had liaised with distinguished faculty from INSEAD, headed by Programme Director Professor Reinhard Angelmar, to develop a 6-day executive leadership course especially for doctors representing the medical associations of their respective countries. Pfizer sponsored the course and accommodation.

Our President, Dr Wong Chiang Yin, 1st Vice-President, Dr Chong Yeh Woei and I were very privileged to be given the honour to represent our country in the inaugural WMA-INSEAD Leadership Development Course, held from 3 to 8 December 2007.

We arrived in Paris Charles de Gaulle airport on 2 Dec 2007 on a particularly cold, grey and wet morning and were fortunate to have a waiting taxi to take us directly to our hostel at Fontainebleau. Our chauffeur told us that it had been raining non-stop in the Paris region for two weeks already. Upon our arrival at Clos St Merry in Fontainebleau, we were ushered to our comfortable hostel rooms and given course materials to be read that night. With free time on our hands, we ventured out in the cold and rain to explore this erstwhile royal town. It must have been around 2 degrees Celcius that day; the cobblestone streets were narrow and slightly slippery – our foldable umbrellas were useless in the strong wind, so we borrowed INSEAD-emblazoned umbrellas from the hotel. We reached the town's

Sunday market shortly before it closed and Chiang Yin had a field day buying cheese and charcuterie. Near the market was a bakery that sold artisanal bread – we were attracted to the unassuming place by the fragrance of freshly baked breads wafting out to the street. There were brioches and baguettes and many other types of bread made of different kinds of flour. After that, we went to the Chateau de Fontainebleau, which had free entry on the first Sunday of each month. This chateau had for 800 years housed various French monarchs, their families and their court. As a result, the chateau had an interesting mix of architectural styles and interior décor. That first night, we ate at a family restaurant packed with locals – the true mark of good and reasonably-priced food. We had salmon, oysters and steaks accompanied by Sancerre wine. Interestingly, the INSEAD umbrellas we carried led to better-than-expected service from the waiters.

We got up bright and early the next morning to have breakfast before turning up for our first class. The hostel's breakfasts were fantastic. I thoroughly enjoyed the freshly baked breads and pastries of all kinds. The French are fiercely proud of their bread and I could taste the love oozing out of every bite. For the rest of the course, we also had morning and afternoon coffee breaks with healthy snacks and excellent coffee. Lunch was served at the fabulous INSEAD canteen which sells food as diverse as its student mix and afforded a great view of the outdoors from its floor-to-ceiling glass windows. The layout was akin to "Marche" back home where one can go from stall to stall to choose various



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dishes ranging from the appetisers to the main course and dessert. Wine by the glass at lunch was available, as were various fresh fruit, fruit juices and yoghurt. Needless to say, there was also an assortment of cheeses available.

Our course was gruelling but fun. We started punctually at the Amphi Theatre at 0830h and ended at 1730h every day. There were evening learning activities as well as pre-class preparation work every night. 32 participants from 14 countries were broken up into different groups every day. No one from the same country was allowed to remain together; this was to ensure that by the end of the week, we would have worked with everyone and achieved maximum networking. At the end of the course, we were familiar with everyone from South Africa to Estonia, from Brazil to South Korea.

The classrooms were a dream – ergonomic, comfortably designed and set amidst lovely architecture at the Cercle. Eeva Schulz, the Programme Coordinator, did a great job making the course run like clockwork. The Programme Director, Prof Angelmar, gave a clear and concise introduction to healthcare systems and our programme objectives. The faculty consisted of very distinguished lecturers, all of whom were renowned in their own fields. Incidentally, Prof Angelmar once sang in the Vienna Boy's choir.

The first activity on teambuilding required us to locate specific marked trees in the forest that we were given about a minute to observe before being blindfolded. The catch was that we had to

assign a team leader, hold hands in single file, and agree to be led by the said blindfolded leader through the forest. The results were hilarious and revealing – no team found their assigned trees. Every team's elaborate plans on how to find the trees fell through, not least because everyone wanted to be the "Indian chief" and not a follower, and every one was opinionated to different degrees. After that, we played three other games and by the end of that day, we knew each other's characters pretty well. Remember what someone said about learning everything you need to know in life from kindergarten? Well, it is true, especially if you play team games together vigorously.

Arm-wrestling was another fun activity. The objective was to score as many points as possible in one minute by touching our opponent's hand to the table and we were not allowed to talk to our opponents before and during the "game". I was paired with a 6 foot 5 inch tall anaesthesiologist from Israel, Dr Leonid Eidelman, and we both managed to score very high marks because we quickly brought each other's hand to the table as many times as possible in one minute. Some other people did not score as well because they tried to resist their opponent. Those among us who had high scores used eye contact to signal our own "rules" since this was not explicitly disallowed. Horatio Falcao used this game to illustrate what happens in multi-party negotiations because a win-win situation is more advantageous for long-term cooperation and it is better to concede non-essential points to the opponent instead of trying too hard to win.

The subsequent days were very hectic and we were taught diverse subjects such as "Individual Judgement and Group Decision Making" by Jon Chilingirian; "Conducting Business Across Cultures and Improving Cross-cultural and Virtual communication" by Erin Meyer; "Multi-party Negotiations and Coalition Building" by Horatio Falcao, "Navigating Media Environment and Working with the Media" by Cam Battley and effective networking techniques by Dr Albert Schumacher.

In a case study under Jon Chilingirian, we had to identify facts as opposed to assumptions as a group and this led us to creative solutions to the problem. We also practiced selling our ideas and truth-telling. Jon was absolutely adamant about truth-telling to the media and trained us on how to tell the truth without compromising our position.

I found Erin Meyer's lessons and group activities on cross-cultural awareness and communication particularly useful, since Singapore is a multi-racial, and multi-cultural society. Many of the concepts she brought up were directly relevant to our day-to-day

All the classes were interactive and involved group projects held under tight time constraints. These activities simulated the situations that various medical associations are faced with when dealing with issues back home.



Taiwanese colleagues, Dr Ramin Parsa-Parsi from Germany, Dr Bertha Woon and Dr Irina Sebova from Slovakia



Arm-wrestling with Dr Leonid Eidelman from Israel



Dr Abdul Razaks and Dr Bertha Woon representing SMA in the CMAAO Conference, Manila



Jon Chilingirian demonstrating a point in class



Sunset over the Fontainebleau forest



(L-R): Dr Chong Yeh Woei, Dr Irina Sebova from Slovakia Medical Association and Dr Bertha Woon at the WMA General Assembly, Seoul



work as doctors. These included “Power Distance”, “High versus Low Context” communications, “Confrontation” and modes in which “Negative Feedback” is delivered. One important point she made was how cross-cultural communication and understanding is harder when the cultures are close geographically, but may not be close in terms of “context”. For example, differences between the French and Americans, or between the Chinese and Japanese would appear minimal at first glance but a gulf exists between them in reality.

We also received media coaching. A few of us were “arrowed” to be the “victims” for interviews on camera every night so that the rest of the class could scrutinise us and pick on our faults on-screen. I had the privilege of being one of the people to have one-on-one media coaching under Cam Battley from Canada. Cam played the devil’s advocate by questioning us on controversial topics to make us as uncomfortable as possible. The star of this segment was Dr Aquina Thulare from South Africa. She has a lot of experience facing the media in South Africa and is a most diplomatic and convincing speaker. Another good spokesman was Dr Ramin

Parsa-Parsi from Germany who spoke very well on camera, despite English not being his working language. We know this because when he spoke in German, he was much more animated and spoke more quickly than in English. Cam’s class was extremely instructive in that many tiny unconscious movements we made became amplified on camera. Other details such as what colour and pattern of clothing to wear, our posture when we sit, our facial expressions, controlling our tics and talking speed were all brought up for discussion. At the end of it, I became more self-aware and prepared if I ever had to speak in public or on camera.

The most challenging activity occurred on the fifth day when we had to combine all that we had learned to represent various stakeholders in a complex multi-party, multi-national negotiation. Each of the five groups had different outcomes but all in all, we managed to achieve our primary goals without conceding too many secondary ones.

Our closing dinner and presentation of certificates was held in a beautiful old chateau which had a moat and a wine cellar. Ancient tapestries hung from every wall in our banquet hall.

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Of course, it goes without saying that the French food and wine were great, although the company was even better. Dr Jose Amaral and Dr Miguel Jorge from Brazil even sang us *soudade* at dinner.

We parted the next day amid fond farewells and solemn promises to keep in touch. The three of us proceeded to Paris where we stayed in a quaint 17th century hotel next to the Faculty of Medicine at the Universite Paris VII for a day of gastronomy before returning home.

Subsequent to this inaugural WMA-INSEAD leadership course, some of us from the course met again at the WMA Meeting in Seoul in October 2008. At this meeting, Singapore took part in voting for the first time. All WMA policies and activities are available online at <http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm>

One of the items we voted for was an amendment to the Helsinki declaration, Section C Point 32, which was necessary to prevent persons in poor or disadvantaged countries from being exploited by big pharmaceutical companies. Being part of the WMA assembly was an eye-

opener – it made me realise how important it is to engage doctors from medical associations on every continent, as well as to uphold the rights of patients and doctors. It also made me realise that none of us are alone in the challenges that we face in everyday medical practice.

The book “Caring Physicians of the World”, which highlights exemplary role models among doctors from all over the world was launched at this WMA Meeting as well.

In November 2008, two SMA Council members represented Singapore at the 44th CMAAO (Confederation of Medical Associations in Asia and Oceania) mid-term Council meeting in Manila. One of CMAAO’s roles is to ensure that voices and opinions of doctors in Asia and Oceania will be heard at WMA meetings, which historically have been dominated by the opinions of Europeans and Americans. The chief issue discussed at this meeting was how global warming was affecting the health of the people in the countries represented by CMAAO members. This was again an eye-opener that brought into perspective the challenges facing all of us today as doctors, wherever we are. ■