



Battling the Enemy on All Fronts

By Alicia Ang

Conference participants holding a public demonstration to educate adolescents on habits which are harmful to health in Bangkok this year

An event that promises to bring together 400 of the region's brightest and finest medical students, who will form the next generation of healthcare leaders in their respective countries, will be held right here in Singapore in January 2012. Never before has an event of such magnitude been staged on the Singapore medical student scene. This event is the 25th East Asian Medical Students' Conference (EAMSC). The theme of the conference, "Infectious Diseases: Battling the Enemy on All Fronts", promises to be relevant and engaging. Infectious diseases remain a pertinent issue in the world despite the recent advancements in healthcare. You will surely remember the global outbreaks of SARS and H1N1, which caused some to become too afraid to even leave their homes. More will know of the challenges we face against other regional diseases such as dengue and malaria. The most recent E. coli outbreak in Europe is a pertinent reminder that we are fighting this constant battle together.

The organisers of this conference are medical students from the Asian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) Singapore, which is a branch of AMSA International, an organisation that aims to resolve and ameliorate healthcare problems through a network of medical students studying in the Asia-Pacific region. The local branch was formed with the backing of the National University of Singapore Medical Society. Having personally participated in two conferences held in Jakarta and Bangkok (in 2010 and 2011 respectively) previously, I was deeply inspired to bring the experience of organising a conference of such a scale to Singapore, as well as give medical students here the chance to interact with medical students from all over the Asia-Pacific. (Check out the AMSA Singapore website amsasg.medsoc.org.sg for the link to the EAMSC website.)

Students are brought together to engage in rigorous academic discussion and competitions. The comprehensive academic programme includes lectures, workshops, guided workplan discussions, and scientific paper, poster and health campaign competitions.

However, this conference is like no other you have ever seen. For our conference, we will be offering our delegates a novel White Paper experience, which would allow them to come up with a combined paper incorporating policies from all over the Asia-Pacific, which they can then implement in their countries after the conference. Through this, we hope to highlight the significant need for collaboration between countries and healthcare professionals in order to keep up with the constant threat of current and emerging infectious diseases.



The Singapore delegation to the Bangkok conference

Community service by the delegates will be a pivotal component of the conference. It is heartwarming and meaningful to see future doctors engage the community actively. In Jakarta where the theme was Geriatric Medicine, I got a chance to visit the various nursing homes and interact with the Indonesian elderly. I found it extremely meaningful, and learnt that love and warmth can be conveyed in spite of the language barrier (I can barely greet a person in Bahasa Indonesia!).

Delegates will also participate in site visits relevant to the theme. At the conference in Bangkok on adolescent health this year, I clearly remember the visit to the restaurant Condoms and Cabbages, located next

to the headquarters of the Mechai Viravaidya Foundation. I was quite taken aback by the various “art pieces” there (they were made of... condoms!). Imagine my shock when Mr Mechai Viravaidya challenged us to blow condoms up like balloons! It was indeed an eye-opening experience to see Mr Viravaidya, an activist himself, breach the controversial topic of contraceptives with the delegates who visited the site. I left the place with many thoughts, especially after learning about the challenges he faced introducing the use of contraceptives during the AIDS epidemic in a conservative nation like Thailand.

Cultural exchange is also a key feature of this conference. In Jakarta, I got the chance to learn Javanese dance, and even tried my hand at batik painting! In fact, I still have the batik that I painted during the conference. During EAMSC 2012, we will be introducing the delegates to some of the aspects of traditional Singaporean culture, including delicious food (I’m getting hungry already), that we are all proud of. There will also be a cultural night, which gives the delegates from each country a chance to showcase their culture to the other participants.

As the icing on the cake, we have also included an exciting social programme, where delegates get to experience the various exciting sights and sounds of our country.

With such a packed and engaging programme, this conference promises the unparalleled opportunity for interaction among medical students from the region. In fact, delegates from different countries are even roomed together to further enhance the interaction. Given that local medical students have limited opportunities to interact with our counterparts from other countries, I truly cherished the opportunity I had during the conferences – and desired strongly to bring that same experience to our medical students here in Singapore. Not everyone in medical school will have the opportunity to fly overseas to interact with medical students and healthcare professionals in other countries – however, EAMSC 2012 will see these foreign delegates right here in Singapore. With more than 200 local medical students involved in the conference (and this number continues to grow as we move into the later phases of our planning), this massive undertaking promises to be one of a kind, and will go into the history books of the local medical scene.

The vision we have for this conference is an exciting one. As we all come together to learn from both eminent speakers and one another, we aim to empower all delegates with the relevant knowledge of infectious diseases. In so doing, we hope that they will be inspired and equipped to take action before, during and after the conference, with the intention of benefiting their local and regional community. Finally, we wish for all delegates to form firm friendships that will last for many more years to come, and we believe that these friendships form a springboard for future collaborations amongst healthcare leaders in the region.

The journey towards EAMSC 2012 has been an incredibly fulfilling yet tiring one, cliched as that may sound. The organising committee has been learning a lot on this journey, and we are really grateful to advisors such as A/Prof Paul Tambyah and Prof V Anantharaman, who tirelessly shared their own experiences with us. We have faced several obstacles along the way. For instance, it has been an immense challenge trying to raise sufficient funding for the conference, as we are limited by the amount we can charge delegates (since there are by-laws limiting conference fees to make the

conference as accessible as possible). Nevertheless, we will continue to push on – because of our deep conviction that the conference can be a stepping stone for future collaborations on healthcare in the region, as well as our sincere desire to bring international and local medical students together in a meaningful manner.

We invite you – the medical community and other interested parties – to join us in contributing your part to this historic event in welcoming the foreign delegates to Singapore. Together, we can battle the enemy on all fronts and be part of something worth remembering! **SMA**



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Enjoying the company of residents in a nursing home in Jakarta during the conference in 2010



Loving the company of fellow medical students from the Asia-Pacific in Jakarta in 2010