

A Bird's Eye View: Reflections on EAMSC 2012

By Alicia Ang



EAMSC 2012 Day 4: students join in a mass hand washing session in an attempt to break the world record

It was a beautiful picture – medical students from all over the world, of different backgrounds, and at different stages of their medical careers, coming together to achieve a better understanding of a global health issue of our time, Infectious Diseases.

This was the essence of the 25th East Asian Medical Students' Conference (EAMSC), held in Singapore for the very first time from 15 to 20 January 2012. The conference was themed "Infectious Diseases: Battling the Enemy on All Fronts", and encompassed several components, combining academic workshops, sightseeing trips, cultural sessions, and even a community service segment, where the 350 international delegates performed a hand hygiene dance for the public, and helped to break the world record of the greatest number of hand washing participants in a bid to spread awareness about hand hygiene!

With so many aspects to the conference, much manpower was also needed. The conference brought together more than 100 local students as members of the Organising Committee, Group Moderators and facilitators – all of whom are medical students from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM). Preparation for EAMSC 2012 started more than a year before the actual conference, and it was immensely fulfilling to see all our work crystallise during the conference itself!

The lead-up to the conference brought with it many challenges and joys – as medical students, it was difficult juggling our studies with organising the conference, and at busy periods, we often joked that we were "full time



Day 1: the delegates enjoying themselves at the Welcome Party at Club Avatar?

conference organisers, and part time medical students"! In addition, with the involvement of such a large number of students spanning all the years of medical school (in fact, one of our student advisors is a final year medical student!), it was tricky to work with the vastly different schedules of different years – especially since many of the committees were made up of students from both pre-clinical and clinical years of their studies.

For the Vice-Organising Chairperson and myself, the Organising Chairperson, one of the biggest issues we faced was learning to manage all the talented students working in the Organising Committee effectively – to tap on their strengths and experience, and to tie in the work of separate committees to form the final product! We had to learn to

reach a fine balance: between granting each committee member the autonomy to work on their part, and interfering so that there was synergy between the work of different people! There was a lot of experimentation involved because none of us had ever run a conference before – and we used our past experiences and pieced them together. For instance, the Welcome Party was part dinner and dance, part school bash; and part of the inspiration for the hand hygiene dance stemmed from the orientation camp dances we always do to induct freshmen into the university.

I am thankful that we dared to try, and dared to dream,



Day 2: Guest of Honour, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong (centre), with the EAMSC 2012 Organising Committee at the Opening Ceremony



Day 2: with the unveiling of the banner, EAMSC 2012 has officially begun!

expanding on the programme of the conference and introducing new initiatives with the hopes of giving the delegates a more enriching experience. Of note was the White Paper segment, where delegates from different nations all gathered to generate consolidated views on national epidemic planning and proposals on how medical students can be further involved and engaged with the healthcare system, in the context of epidemic preparedness.

Another bold move was to host the Cultural Fair on a larger scale, making it a carnival-style event where we proudly displayed our local food, culture, and games, and gave every participating country a place to share something special about their own cultures as well. Common to the above two initiatives was this: delegates from different backgrounds had a chance to demonstrate their own uniqueness, yet when they came together, we also see that “unity in diversity” is an ideal that can become a reality.

In order to battle the enemy on all fronts, there has to be cooperation amongst healthcare professionals from different countries, with different backgrounds, and at different stages of career. It was our desire that the conference would provide foreign and local medical students with the impetus to work together with their counterparts, as students now, and professionals in the future. The conclusion of the conference brought us much relief, but we know that it only marks the beginning of more collaboration in the future; and judging from the enthusiasm of both the delegates and the Organising Committee, we believe future collaborations are a definite possibility.



Day 3: delegates from Korea posing with their entry for the Health Campaign Competition

workshops, and judge our many competitions. I would also like to extend my gratitude to our faculty's leadership for their continuous support, to the Student Affairs team for working alongside us this whole journey, and to the National University Health System (NUHS) Communications team for providing us with round-the-clock support in terms of media, publicity, and beyond.

EAMSC 2012 has made me realise how privileged I am to be a medical student in Singapore – because there are so many within the medical community who are ever ready to offer assistance and share their wealth of experience with us. **SMA**

Alicia is from the YLLSoM Class of 2014 and was the Organising Chairperson of EAMSC 2012.

EAMSC 2012: On the Ground

By Alexandra Yung



Day 3: delegates took a ride on the Singapore Flyer and enjoyed a panoramic view of our Garden City

On Group Moderators

The role of the Organising Committee was to plan various parts of the conference, and coordinate the execution of every event. At the same time, there was another group of students whose role was equally important – the Group Moderators, or GMs for short. The GMs acted as facilitators for the delegates, who were split into groups with a good mix of countries in each. As members of the Organising Committee had to oversee the running of the conference, they relied heavily on the GMs, who were with the delegates almost all the time, to be the face of Singapore and also YLLSoM to the delegates. I was one of the GMs for EAMSC 2012.

EAMSC 2012 ended close to two months ago, on 20 January 2012. When it first did, some of us, myself included, felt like we had just stepped out of a beautiful, unforgettable dream, which made the abrupt switch into “real life” that much

more unbearable. We commonly describe this as a condition known as the post-conference syndrome, an infectious and highly contagious disease from which no delegate, GM, or member of the Organising Committee is spared. The symptoms include terrible nostalgia, Facebook addiction, an unexplainable attachment to one’s conference t-shirt and photo albums, and inertia to settle into what once was.

Everything happened so fast. On Sunday, 15 January 2012, I reported early for registration and tour guide duties at the hotel. It was a challenge managing the delegates, who were accumulating in the lobby very quickly, but a great relief to bring delegates who had already registered on a tour along the Singapore River and to Great World City. Everyone ended the day with a crazy, fun-filled welcome party at Club Avatar, returning to the hotel happy, albeit late.

The morning of Day 2 marked the official start of the conference with the Opening Ceremony, with Minister Gan Kim Yong as our Guest of Honour. We celebrated the commencement of the conference with a beautiful music and dance item put up by two local medical students. Besides the Opening Ceremony, this day also comprised three Opening Keynote Lectures and Academic Presentations by the various delegations. It was an academically heavy day, and we thought we’d have a struggle with my group of 16 sleepy delegates and four fatigued GMs, but joy abounded, and all was not lost. After the day’s programme ended, we brought our foreign friends on a campus tour while aboard the university’s internal shuttle bus. Lucas, one of my fellow GMs, was the star of the show – he was an expert tour guide with a wealth of general knowledge and trivia unknown to the common man. Everyone was in awe of, and thoroughly engaged by his commentary.



Day 4: at NEA, the students were taught the importance of preventing mosquito breeding, as well as the steps they could take to eradicate mosquito breeding in their areas

Day 3 saw interesting workshops on Infectious Diseases, and the Health Campaign and Scientific Poster Competition. My group, in particular, attended three workshops on Malaria, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and Infectious Diseases of the Respiratory System. (For the Organising Committee, it was extremely challenging coordinating workshops held concurrently – not only did we have to regulate human traffic and ensure that the many



groups of delegates were able to find the right venue for their pre-assigned workshop, amidst the usual working crowd at the NUHS Tower Block, we also had to ensure that every speaker was appropriately and professionally hosted and welcomed to the appropriate venue.) That evening, we had a most scrumptious dinner at Lau Pa Sat, inclusive of chili crabs, satay, chicken rice, oyster omelette and ice kacang. What a meal! One delegate even said that it was his best meal in Singapore. Later, a ride on the Singapore Flyer, a scenic walk back to the hotel, and smiles ended the beautiful day.

After three intense days, I was starting to wonder whether being part of a conference was a more effective slimming programme than good ol' exercise. Over the past few days with so much to do, I hardly had time to think of eating, let alone actualise the thought. Day 4 was no exception to this. First, we visited the National Environment Agency's (NEA) Sin Ming branch, and were given a crash course in mosquito catching. Operation Disinfect, our community service project to teach little children in kindergarten how to wash their hands, took place in the afternoon. We taught them a song and dance to help them remember the seven steps of effective hand washing, repeating the dance later as a flash mob performance at City Square Mall. That was my first flash mob ever! A hard day's work was duly rewarded with a trip to the Night Safari.

The Closing Ceremony, Cultural Fair, and Cultural Night took place on the final day of the conference. The realisation that my fairytale week was ending started to set in. Every country was required to put up a Cultural Performance for the Cultural Night. The Japanese presented a fisherman's dance, the Indonesians showcased their angklung skills, South Korea brought their famous brand of K-pop music to the stage, and much more! It was all so fascinating I forgot to eat. I made many friends that night and enjoyed myself more than I can express.

We didn't leave the hotel till 1 in the morning; some groups even went out after. Bright and early on 20 January 2012, we went back to the hotel to see our friends off, and hand them their photos of Group 20 in wooden photo frames. We also offered to take a couple of Hong Kong delegates to Chinatown in the morning for a Singapore breakfast of kaya toast and soft-boiled eggs. To my delight, they said it made their trip.

Selwyn Hughes, a published author, wrote in his daily

devotionals: *where there is no challenge, there is little change.* EAMSC challenged my thinking – positivity over rigidity and negativity. It led me to view conferences differently and appreciate cultural exchange a little more. Prior to this conference I had no desire whatsoever to improve my Mandarin, and had a stagnant interest in Chinese culture. I now have friends around the world, who constantly share things about their wonderful countries with me. I made new friends in medical school. I gained confidence. And most importantly, I learned to keep moving forward, and face tomorrow with a positive attitude, remembering the best of today and learning from the worst. Even though this conference has come to an end, it's not THE end of the world. Everything about EAMSC challenged me to greater heights – the people, the hours, the limits.

I left the hotel on 20 January 2012, feeling humbled by the people I've met, and inspired by them all, but also deeply sad that they won't be physically around in Singapore anymore.

If you ever catch this infectious bug, don't panic. This is a condition that brings joy and hope for the future. Who knows? I might see all my friends again at the next conference, and maybe make some new ones. Challenges are inevitable, but embracing them gracefully, joyfully with a willing heart, and a constant smile, is the true secret to life.

No pain, no gain; no challenge, no change. I hope you've enjoyed reading about my time and memories as a truly blessed EAMSC Group Moderator. This may very be history's only record of the pathology and signs of the condition known as post-conference syndrome. **SMA**

Alexandra is from the YLLSoM Class of 2016, and was one of the Group Moderators of EAMSC 2012.

Photos: Joshua Koh (Class of 2015), Hester Lau (Class of 2016), Annthea Dominique Lee (Class of 2014), Shen Jiayi (Class of 2014), and Daniel Teh (Class of 2016)