

# 29th CMAAO General Assembly and 50th Council Meeting

Text by Dr Chong Yeh Woei and Dr Bertha Woon  
Photos by CMAAO Secretariat



WMA President Dr Margaret Mungherera and CMAAO President Dr Jose Asa Sabili (sitting, centre and second from left respectively) with CMAAO delegates

**WE HAD** a fruitful meeting with old friends at the 29th Confederation of Medical Associations in Asia and Oceania (CMAAO) General Assembly and 50th Council Meeting, held at Marriott Hotel in Manila from 24 to 26 September. We were warmly hosted by incoming CMAAO President Dr Jose Asa Sabili, affectionately known as Jojo. He was backed by the logistics capability of the Philippine Medical Association (PMA), which is helmed by Dr Maria Minerva P Calimag, an inspirational anaesthetist and mother of eight children, half of whom are doctors and the other half, medical students.

This year's meeting was particularly exceptional, as the World Medical Association (WMA) President Dr Margaret Mungherera, a psychiatrist from Uganda, graced us with her presence. She is extremely articulate, and has seen quite a bit of life under the iron hand of the infamous Idi Amin. The other distinguished guest in attendance was the current president of the American Medical Association (AMA), Dr Robert Wah, who is a gynaecologist. He is the first AMA president, in 169 years, to be of Chinese origin. We were fortunate to hear keynote addresses from these two physician leaders.

## Getting down to business

During the meeting, we had the privilege of speaking to Dr Primitivo D Chua, an 80-year-old Filipino doctor who

served as a CMAAO Councillor for his country way back in the 1950s, when Dr Taro Takemi of Japan and the Filipinos first mooted the idea of the confederation.

Dr Chua, also a previous president of PMA, shared the early history of CMAAO with us. We were heartened to learn about warm-hearted doctors who had worked relentlessly for the last five to six decades, often without due recognition, to protect the rights of doctors and patients in our part of the world. Dr Woon then updated him about the changes to the CMAAO Constitution that she had made with help from various national medical associations (NMAs) and the confederation's legal counsel Mr Shinichi Murata. The revised Constitution enables the confederation to mobilise member NMAs to cooperate more easily and quickly, considering an increase in regional emergencies and crises in recent years, such as the 2011 Japan earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan.

As usual, each NMA delivered a country report. It has always been very enlightening and instructive to hear NMAs talk about issues that they are grappling with back home. For example, Japan spoke at length of their huge problems with the ageing silver tsunami, Nepal discussed violence against doctors by Maoist insurgents, and Myanmar described their difficulties of setting up a medical council and medical indemnity insurance.

For Singapore's report, we highlighted the challenges of attracting and retaining members in our association, which is something all NMAs face. We also brought up the recent findings of the Singapore Medical Council (SMC) Review Committee, the consultation exercise for the proposed new SMC Ethical Code and Professional Standards, and the ongoing saga for the need to bring back the Guideline on Fees.

These country reports were fascinating and gave us tremendous insight into the issues that developing and developed nations face respectively, so that we can learn from these countries as they surmount the obstacles.

CMAAO meetings always include an academic programme as well, and this year's theme was "Health Database in an Information Technology Society". It was no coincidence that we were able to tap on Dr Wah's experience as he is a recognised expert in health IT and was instrumental in assisting the Obama administration to set up electronic medical records for most American citizens. On our part, we articulated our experiences with the National Electronic Health Record, Project CLEO (GP Clinic Electronic Medical Record and Operation System) for GPs, and the Personal Data Protection Act along with its ramifications on the healthcare sector.

A special World Health Organization representative gave a presentation on multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR TB) in the Philippines and the alarming statistics of the disease in the Asia-Pacific region. It was truly a wake-up call because the mortality of MDR TB is five times worse than breast cancer.

During the meeting, all NMA representatives hammered together a unified Resolution on Ethical Frameworks for Health Databases and Human Genetic Databases, to highlight Asia-Pacific concerns during the WMA meeting that had been scheduled to be held in Durban in early October, the following month. This is an example of how regional representation can enhance advocacy for patient and physician rights on the world stage.

The camaraderie among the various delegates was palpable and most of them were familiar faces that we have gotten to know over the years. It is always fascinating to share a meal with people from different nationalities and to understand their way of life, healthcare system, and how they operate within their constraints. Dr Mungherera provided insights on the challenges that the African continent is currently confronting, which was eye-opening since we rarely hear much from that region, except perhaps the Ebola outbreak. In reality, Africa's battle with Ebola is a very small part of what actually is happening in the continent. When the meeting concluded and we had to part ways, it was with the anticipation that we would meet up in Yangon in 2015 for the next CMAAO assembly.

CMAAO (<http://www.cmaao.org>) comprises 18 NMAs from the Asia-Pacific region. The organisation was founded in 1956 and has come a long way since its inception. It has become an influential bloc at the WMA General Assembly. ■



*Dr Chong is a member of the 55th SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir, loves the FT Weekend and of course, wishes for world peace...*



*Dr Woon runs her own practice, Bertha Woon General and Breast Surgery, full-time at Gleneagles Medical Centre. Currently taking a break from being an advocate and solicitor of the Supreme Court, she is an associate mediator at the Singapore Mediation Centre and one of the four associates of the Medical Protection Society in Singapore.*

**From top**  
**AMA President Dr Robert Wah delivering an address**  
**Dr Chong presenting SMA's country report**  
**Dr Woon discussing the use of IT in healthcare in Singapore**