

SHINING THE SPOTLIGHT ON FOOD SAFETY

— THE 30TH CMAAO GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The Confederation of Medical Association in Asia and Oceania (CMAAO) has been in existence since 1956. The organisation was founded by Dr Taro Takemi, a visionary doctor and President of the Japan Medical Association for 25 years. We attended the 30th general assembly in Yangon, Myanmar, hosted by the Myanmar Medical Association.

The membership of CMAAO comprises 18 national medical associations, including our Association of Southeast Asian Nations neighbours and countries from East Asia, including Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Korea. Australasia is represented by Australia and New Zealand, while South Asia is represented by India and Bangladesh.

FOCUS ON FOOD SAFETY

The conference programme included an opening ceremony, the inauguration of a new president, a plenary session and an academic programme. This year, Food Safety was the theme of the scientific session, which included the Taro Takemi Memorial Oration, named after the late president of the association, and a scientific seminar.

It was enlightening to learn that food safety is not just about the prevention of transmission of bacteria, parasites and viruses in food, but also encompasses chemicals, organic toxins, heavy metals, and organic pollutants such as dioxins, which accumulate in humans and disrupt endocrine function.

We learnt that the widespread use of antimicrobials in human and veterinary medicine has resulted in resistant bacteria entering the food chain through animals (eg, salmonella in chickens). We also discovered that the jury is still out on the long-term safety of genetically modified foods. Today, food chains, from production to consumption, span borders and have

PROFILE



TEXT BY

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Dr Chong was SMA President from 2009 to 2012 and is a member of the 56th 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...

Legend

1. Old friends include Dr Rai Myra, CMAAO president from Myanmar, Secretary General Dr Masami Ishii from Japan and Treasurer Dr Alvin Chan from Hong Kong
2. Shwedagon Pagoda at sunrise
3. Japan Medical Association delegates
4. Banners of the member medical organisations of CMAAO

Photos by Dr Tammy Chan



become longer and more complex. Furthermore, urbanisation, travel and changes in consumer habits have led to an increased number of people buying and eating food prepared in public places. In light of these current developments, maintenance of high food safety standards is of crucial importance to health.

LEARNING FROM OUR COUNTERPARTS

We have always found the presentation of country reports to be an interesting aspect of the assembly. We have gained much from hearing about the issues that our fellow colleagues faced when dealing with their respective governments, civil society and the public at large.

Our Bangladeshi colleagues revealed that harassment and assault of doctors by hooligans is rampant in their country, in part due to a tradition that originated from the previous authoritarian regime where thugs are hired to do its bidding. We heard the concerns from Malaysia on the ramifications of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement that our governments are negotiating. These concerns include the extension of patent periods and patent protection of diagnostic, therapeutic and surgical

techniques, both of which could result in doctors having to pay royalties for the use of these patented techniques. However, an interesting aspect is the exclusivity of data imposed by the TPP, which would delay the introduction of generic drugs once the patents on these drugs expire.

The Philippines reported on their fight against the legalisation of cannabis on compassionate grounds, while our Hong Kong colleagues informed the assembly of lead contamination in potable water in their public housing estates. Indonesia reported on the effects of the country's anti-corruption drive on the medical sector. The Japanese reminded us of the massive "super ageing" problem faced by their society. Our Korean colleagues recounted their crisis with MERS-CoV, during which I must confess that I had a post-traumatic flashback to the dark days of our SARS crisis in 2003.

Myanmar updated us on the floods in July 2015 and their disaster relief activities, which included 22 projects funded by United Nation bodies and international agencies to bring medical care to underdeveloped regions in the remote areas of the Shan, Kachin and Rakhine states. The Nepalese alerted us to the plight of violence against

their doctors, while the Taiwanese reported on the disaster involving the ignition of flammable powder in a water park that resulted in burn injuries to 498 youths. The Australians spoke about the budget cuts under the Abbott/Turnbull government and how cigarette companies are suing the government for introducing plain packaging for cigarettes.

FINAL THOUGHTS

At the CMAAO meeting, we gained knowledge and wisdom from the lessons learnt by our colleagues in the region, during the various sessions and in the midst of interacting with old friends and new ones.

Yangon is a city that is reminiscent of Singapore under the British colonial rule – the atmospheric calm of the two-millennium-old Shwedagon pagoda at sunrise, the waft of fragrant Burmese curries, salads and desserts, and the afternoon tea at the Strand Hotel, opened by our own Sarkies brothers of the Raffles Hotel fame. I would strongly recommend a visit to this beautiful country before the winds of change spoil its serene beauty. ♦

