Report on Junior ASEAN Travelling Fellowship 2001

Wahyu Eko Widiarso, Vijaya Kumar, Edmund Oreta, Pariyut Chiarapattanakom, Yue Wai Mun

This year, despite the events of air disasters in New York and Washington and the current regional economic slowdown, the 19th Junior ASEAN Orthopaedic Travelling Fellowship commenced under the auspices of the ASEAN Orthopaedic Association, thus maintaining the close relationship between the orthopaedic communities of the original five ASEAN countries. The five fellows who were selected were Drs Wahyu Eko Widiarso (Indonesia), Vijaya Kumar (Malaysia), Edmund Oreta (Philippines), Pariyut Chiarapattanakom (Thailand) and Yue Wai Mun (Singapore). Singapore was chosen as the first stop.

SINGAPORE

It was on the early morning of 9 September 2001 that five strangers met in the lobby of the Apollo Hotel in Singapore. Unsure of what to expect, Drs Wahyu Eko Widiarso (from Indonesia), Vijaya Kumar (from Malaysia), Edmund Oreta (from Philippines), Pariyut Chiarapattanakom (from Thailand) and Yue Wai Mun (from Singapore) took the first tentative steps in the beginning of the Junior ASEAN Travelling Fellowship 2001. Armed with only superficial knowledge of each other's culture and healthcare system, the five made their way to National University Hospital, the first of many hospitals that will be visited in the next five weeks. While there were differences in the setup and technologies employed, we could not but feel that each country has developed a system suited for the needs of its own population.

The other hospitals we visited in Singapore were Singapore General Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Alexandra Hospital, Changi General Hospital and Kandang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital. Everywhere we went, we were treated to great hospitality, interesting discussions on clinical cases as well as fantastic food. Among the most memorable were the incredibly lifelike hand prosthesis made in the National University Hospital, the cavernous operating theatres of the Singapore General Hospital, the historical museum of Tan Tock Seng Hospital, the vast colonial buildings of Alexandra Hospital, the well-equipped physiotherapy and occupational therapy departments of Changi General Hospital and the children-friendliness of the facilities in Kandang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital. Senior doctors, former Junior and Senior ASEAN Travelling Fellows played hosts. Many took time off from their busy schedules to show us the facilities of their hospitals and led discussions on the papers that we have prepared and on other clinical problems. Special thanks are due to Drs Tay Boon Keng, Yu Chun Sing, Shamal Das De, Lim Beng Hai, Lim Swee Lian, See Hung Foo, Low Boon Yong, Tan Seang Beng and not least the Secretary-General of the ASEAN Orthopaedic Association, Dr Ong Leong Boon, for making the five of us feel at home. Finally we attended the Saturday conference of the Singapore Orthopaedic Association and the Singapore Hand Society, which was hosted by Dr Teoh Lam Chuan on 15 September.

Of course it was not all work and no play in our stay in Singapore. We did manage to do some sightseeing as well and shopping in the time in between visits to hospitals. What would a visit to Singapore be without visits to Sentosa, Jurong Bird Park and the Night Safari? A cable car ride in a glass-bottom cable car from Mount Faber to Sentosa provided a bird's eye view of the Singapore harbour. The Underwater World at Sentosa was such a refreshing experience that we went around it twice. The singing macaws in the Jurong Bird Park belted out English, Chinese, Japanese and Malay numbers to our delight. The Night Safari provided a unique opportunity for us to observe the habits of nocturnal animals. Especially memorable was the walk through the bat enclosure where we came within inches of numerous bats. No one received a phlebotomy of course but it was nonetheless quite a harrowing experience.

Before we knew it, it was time to move on to Malaysia where more adventures awaited us.

MALAYSIA

We arrived in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia on the 16th of September. The multi-racial communities living harmoniously in this country was clearly evident on day one of our visit.

In Malaysia, we managed to visit 7 major hospitals and what amazed us was that the healthcare cost is still being heavily subsidized by the government. Although just like most other ASEAN countries, patients have to bear the cost of implants used, the daily admission charges of the 3rd class ward is only RM 3/=. The University Hospital (Assoc Prof David Choon) and UKM Hospital (Assoc Profs Mohamad Razak and Sharaf Ibrahim) were the first two hospitals that we visited. These hospitals are the training centres for orthopaedics, equipped with good training and research facilities. We proceeded to visit Kuala Lumpur Hospital (Dato' Borhan Tan) and Selayang Hospital (Dr Ramli Baba) the next day. The latter hospital is reputed as a "paperless hospital" and what we saw certainly justifies its reputation as the hallmark achievement of healthcare and information technology in this country.

Midweek plans to take a coach to the northern region certainly added more colour to the visit to Malaysia. Apart from some of us struggling with our heavy luggage at the respective bus stations, it also gave us an opportunity to see the picturesque scenery of the mountains and reservoirs along the highways. Once again we actively participated in clinical discussions at Penang Hospital (Dr Se To Boon Chong), Ipoh Hospital (Dato' Ramanathan) and Fatimah Hospital (Dato' K S Siva). Our travelling program was

further enhanced by a brief visit to the B Braun Medical Industries where we were given a guided tour of how general surgical instruments were made from raw steel material.

One of the greatest pleasures of exploring Malaysia was the sampling of the typical Malaysian food variety such as "nasi lemak, laksa penang, satay" and many others. Needless to say, we also enjoyed very much visiting the golden triangle district skyline (Petronas Twin Towers and KL Tower), Putrajaya, Penang Hill, Penang Bridge and the Gurney Drive. With all those lingering good memories we departed to Bangkok on 23rd September with great expectations.

THAILAND

We arrived in The Land of Smiles on 23rd of September. Very quickly, we came to realize that the main medical provider in Thailand is the government. The government hospitals are the undisputed leaders in advanced medical technology. As a result, western medicine is slowly but surely gaining the trust of the population and fewer complications resulting from the treatment of traditional bonesetters are being seen nowadays. The ratio of orthopaedic surgeons to population is around 1:60,000 but mainly concentrated in the big cities. To alleviate the problems due to the mal-distribution of orthopaedic surgeons in the country, 70 to 80 orthopaedic surgeons are trained from training centres all over the country each year. Most of the orthopaedic surgeons are working as general orthopaedic surgeons. An orthopaedic surgeon who works in a specific field is confined to training centres but the subspecialty training is gaining in popularity in recent years.

Five hospitals were visited during our stay in Thailand. Ramathibodi Hospital is well known for the Ramathibodi Spine System, which is a set of locally made spine instrumentation system. The head of department is Dr Pornchai Mulapruk. We also had the opportunity to observe spine surgery using the Ramathibodi plate performed by Dr Vichian Laohacharoensombat who is the main surgeon involved in the invention of the system.

Siriraj Hospital is the largest and oldest hospital in Thailand. The head of the department is Dr Prasit Gonggetyai who is also the President of AOA at this time. Apart from the department tour, we had an unforgettable experience at Condon Anatomy Museum, where we saw many impressive dissected specimens, cadavers and skeletons, including those of past professors of the hospital. We were kindly guided by Dr Banchong Mahaisawiriya.

Nakorn Pathom Hospital is a regional hospital west of Bangkok. The patients mainly have severe injuries from traffic accidents. Dr Wiwat Surangsrirat, the head of department, his staff as well as staff from Rajchaburi Hospital demonstrated their innovative spirit by applying simple ideas to solve complex problems. Among the innovations we saw was an instrumentation set for endoscopic carpal tunnel release, modified from an old knee arthroscope.

The Institute of Orthopaedics, Lerdsin General Hospital is well known as a trauma centre. Nowadays, it has expanded its expertise to cover all the orthopaedic subspecialties. The head of department is Dr Phairat Thuvasethakul. The junior ASEAN Travelling Fellow of Thailand is from this hospital.

Chulalongkorn Hospital is the largest Red Cross Society hospital in the world. The head of department is Dr Pibul Itirawong. It is also the home of the President of the Royal Collage of the Thai Orthopaedic Surgeons, Dr Chaithavat Ngarmukos.

Thailand is a country of arts and cultures. We spent our free time travelling around Bangkok and its vicinity, visiting such famous landmarks as the Grand Palace, Wat Po, Nakorn Pathom, Budda Monthon and Ayutthaya. The Chatuchak Weekend Market as well as a boat trip along the Chao Phraya River was also part of our journey during the week. Very soon, we were bound for the Philippines, taking with us, unforgettable memories of Bangkok.

PHILIPPINES

Manila, Philippines was the fourth leg of our ASEAN Travelling Fellowship. We were welcomed by the entire staff of the POA at the cocktail party for the opening of the new POA office. We also attended the birthday party of the incumbent POA President, Dr Lauro Abrahan, Jr. Among all the ASEAN countries, it was in Manila where we visited the most number of hospitals. We went to the Department of Orthopaedics of the Philippine General Hospital, the biggest tertiary hospital in the Philippines; the Philippine Orthopaedic Center, the largest orthopaedic hospital in the ASEAN region; Makati Medical Center, one of the most modern and biggest private hospital, where we also got to meet Dr Ramon Gustilo; the UST hospital, one of the oldest university-based hospitals; the Jose Reyes Memorial Hospital, AFP Medical Center, East Avenue Medical Center and the Veteran's Memorial Hospital.

However it was not all work in Manila. We also had the opportunity to visit historical and cultural spots like the Intramuros, Rizal Park, the National Musuem, and Malacanang Palace among others. The last day was spent on a work-free, fun-filled, whole day trip to Tagaytay, one of the most popular vacation spots south of Manila. We were accompanied by Sol de Jesus, the indefatigable and ever-helpful secretary of the POA, and her beautiful daughter, Kim. We made a short stop at the People's Palace, formerly known as the Palace in the Sky, where we saw a panoramic view of the Taal Lake and the nearby provinces of Batangas and Laguna. We then proceeded to the Tagaytay Highlands, a country club and resort facility, through the generosity of Dr Lauro Abrahan, where we enjoyed ourselves tremendously. After a sumptuous buffet lunch, we went to the top of Taal volcano. We first took a boat ride through the Taal Lake, and then rode on horse-back to the crater of the volcano. Finally, on our way back to Manila, we were treated to a farewell dinner by the entire staff of the POA at Annabel's restaurant.

The next day we proceeded to our final destination, Bali, Indonesia.

INDONESIA

We arrived in Bali, Indonesia, on Sunday 7th October from Manila via Singapore. The Junior Travelling Fellow from Indonesia had arrived slightly earlier via Jakarta.

We met in Bali International Airport and proceeded to Bali Dynasty Hotel, our home for the next 7 days. Before the official programme began, we took the opportunity to enjoy Kuta Beach, which was just behind the hotel and the Cultural Park of Garuda Wisnu Kencana in the East of Bali.

The next day, we visited Sanglah Hospital, the Province Hospital in Denpasar Bali, which was 20 kilometres from Bali Dynasty Hotel. We were given a guided tour of the wards, operating theatres, and had interesting discussion about the management of the patients in the wards. The consultants of the orthopaedic department are Drs Ketut Siki Kawiyana, Putu Astawa, Mulyadi and Nyoman Dusak. On a separate day, some of us had the opportunity to share our research papers with the staff of Sanglah Hospital.

The Combined Meeting of the Indonesian Orthopaedic Association and the ASEAN Orthopaedic Association began on Wednesday, 10th October. At the opening ceremony we met the leaders of the ASEAN orthopaedic community, who were all eager to share with us their experiences as Junior ASEAN Travelling Fellows. Though many of the overseas speakers withdrew from attending the meeting, we were still fortunate to be able to listen to the informative talks given by eminent experts from around the ASEAN region, such as Drs Chen Po-Guang, Subroto Sapardan, Wong Hee Kit, Antonio A Rivera, Chehab Rukni Hilmy, Ucok P Siregar, David Choon, Kamal Bose, Lee Eng Hin and Suthorn B. After 4 days of academic discussion and renewal of old ties, the Closing Ceremony was held in Garuda Widnu Kencana cultural park, with The Nusantara and Bali Dances as the backdrop.

In between attending the meetings, we found time to visit the most popular attractions of Bali and sampled the best of Bali in terms of art, temples, mountains and lakes. Among the places we visited were Sukawati, Ubud, Kintamani, Tampak Siring (President Indonesian Palace), Tanah Lot, Monkey Forest, Bedugul and Uluwatu. The most interesting was the Trunyan grave in Lake Batur. We also indulged in some handicraft shopping in the Ubud, Sukawati and Bali Galleria.

Soon it was time to bid farewell and go our separate ways. We left on separate flights over the weekend of 13th and 14th October with conflicting emotions. Happy that we were going to see our families again after so long but sad that we are leaving our new found friends. We did agree that the Travelling Fellowship had left us with the sweetest of memories.

CONCLUSION

Five weeks of journeying through 5 countries was not as long as we first expected. At the end of the trip, we could not believe we were going back to our real lives. We had come to realize the tremendous potential of the ASEAN countries and hopefully will bring our experience to improve our own communities. However, what had been most important is that the friendship and the spirit of the Junior ASEAN Travelling Fellowship will never fade from our hearts and minds.