

Healing Hands Across ASEAN: Challenges and Triumphs (a reflection of the 2023 AOA JTF journey)



Perspective from the Journey:

Dr. Dickson Chau, a Singaporean spine surgeon based at Sengkang General Hospital, reflects on the transformative experience of witnessing healthcare in densely populated regions with limited access to basic services. This visit provided a poignant reminder of the realities faced by the majority of ASEAN citizens, and challenged preconceived notions about healthcare disparities.

Introduction:

The ASEAN Orthopaedic Association Junior Travelling Fellowship (AOA JTF) has been a beacon of professional development and international camaraderie since its inception in 1983. This program brings together fellows from AOA member-nations on an enlightening journey through the region, fostering exchange of research and orthopaedic expertise. It also nurtures enduring connections through social gatherings, leading to collaborative efforts by distinguished alumni of the programme in clinical, academic, and educational ventures, contributing to the quality of orthopaedic care in the region. It was unfortunate that the Covid-19 pandemic imposed a hiatus on cross-border travels, halting the program from 2020 to 2022.

Resilience Amidst Setbacks:

In 2023, the AOA JTF triumphantly resumed its activities, with five distinguished fellows embarking on a journey that spanned four member-nations: Brunei, Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. The fellows were, **Dr. Nesta Eggra** from Indonesia, **Dr. Timothy Cheng** from Malaysia, **Dr. Rosalyn Flores** from the Philippines, **Dr. Dickson Chau** from Singapore, and **Dr. Chaiwat** from Thailand.

Institutions Visited:

The fellows had the privilege of visiting esteemed institutions across the region, including the Raja Isteri Pengiran Anak Saleha (RIPAS) and Jerudong Park Medical Centre (JPMC) in Brunei, the Philippine Orthopedic Centre (POC), Philippine General Hospital (PGH) and University of Santo Tomas Hospital (USTH) in the Philippines, the Hospital Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (HUKM) and University of Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) in Malaysia, and the Queen Savang Vadhana Memorial Hospital in Thailand.

My Background:

As a Singaporean surgeon based at Sengkang General Hospital, I've always taken a certain whimsical pride in our cozy rural hospital nestled near the northern boundaries of our country, far from the bustling Central Business District. Yet, upon sharing photos and videos of my "rural hospital" with my fellow delegates, I couldn't help but detect a touch of incredulity. In good humour, the other delegates playfully suggested I deserved to be "burnt at the stake."

This light-hearted banter served as a poignant reminder of my experience visiting several ASEAN cities as part of the ASEAN Orthopaedic Association Junior Travelling Fellowship. I had the privilege of experiencing firsthand what the majority of ASEAN citizens encounter: a life in densely populated regions with limited access to basic healthcare via truly rural hospitals.

Humbling Realizations:

Singapore and Thailand have long been renowned hubs for medical tourism. However, after my travels, I humbly recognized that our allure might not have been rooted so much in surgical prowess, but in the cutting-edge technology we offered to those who could afford it. If anything, our thriving healthcare ecosystem in Singapore might have shielded us surgeons from the more intricate challenges of healthcare provision.

For instance, as a resident, Nesta our Indonesian delegate had become adept at managing polytrauma cases on a weekly basis. Timothy our Malaysian delegate likely handled more cases of TB spine during his training than I might in another five years as a spine surgeon. Whilst Rosalyn, our Filipino delegate, casually shared how she watched as her resident independently performed a pelvic osteotomy and VDRO for a neglected DDH case - a scenario rarely encountered in Singapore, where a similar case might have triggered an inquiry into newborn screening procedures.

Resonant Efforts:

A profound chord struck within me, affirming that irrespective of nationality, doctors are united in their quest to deliver top-notch healthcare to their patients. The perceived differences between our nations boiled down to resources - those extended by governments, public institutions, and private entities.

To reinforce this observation, Depuy Synthes' recent departure from the Philippines, stemming from distribution hurdles, might have indirectly impacted the access of young trainees to internationally recognized AO courses.

Turning Challenges into Opportunities:

Yet, there is hope. Travelling fellowships such as ours, blessed by our predecessors in AOA, have paved the way for mutual opportunities to further the boundaries of Orthopaedic care in the region.

I was thrilled to see Timothy and Rosalyn mulling over the possibility of launching an inaugural AO basic course in Sandakan, Malaysia, just a boat ride away from the Philippines. It warmed me to discuss with Nesta of Spine fellowship opportunities in Singapore, to promote the take-up of endoscopic spine surgery in his hospital in Indonesia. And I eagerly anticipate the opportunity to initiate a multi-centre study with A/Prof Chaiwat's esteemed institution in Songkhla, Thailand.

Bridges for the Future:

On 22nd Oct, the passing of the AOA presidency from A/Prof Denny Lie to A/Prof Thipachart, both former year 2000 AOA JTF delegates, symbolizes the enduring commitment to advancing orthopaedic care across generations.

In an era that celebrates the rise of ASEAN prominence, organizations like AOA are pivotal in fostering collaboration and elevating healthcare standards. I am confident that the year 2023 AOA JTF delegates would similarly maintain warm ties and collective efforts to leave a lasting impact on Orthopaedic care in the region.

Through our collective efforts in the AOA and through our respective national Orthopaedic Associations, inclusive of my heartfelt thanks to A/Prof Poon, my current SOA president who blessed my fellowship, the ASEAN region is poised to continue making strides in healthcare excellence.