

Long-Awaited Reunion at CMAAO 2022

Text by Dr Chong Yeh Woei
Photos by Pakistan Medical Association

I have been chairing more than a hundred weekly Zoom sessions under the auspices of the Confederation of Medical Associations of Asia and Oceania, or CMAAO, over the last two years. The meetings originated with the late Dr KK Aggarwal who started them during the COVID-19 pandemic. He would do research and educate us on aspects of COVID-19, and we would all trade information with each other on the COVID-19 situation in our nations. Unfortunately, he succumbed to COVID-19 in May 2021.

The confederation and its General Assembly

The CMAAO is a confederation of 18 medical associations comprising the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asian nations, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Australia. Our Zoom meetings

were also joined by doctors in Brazil, the US and South Africa. We have held 131 weekly Zoom sessions to date, and are so thankful that these sessions have carried us through the dark days of the last two years. We had the opportunity to learn more about the disease (in particular, the immunology aspects) and observe what went on in real-time in various nations across the globe, while also working as a support group when all seemed bleak and dark.

Hence, it was with hope and anticipation that we could gather in person in Karachi, Pakistan for the General Assembly hosted by the Pakistan Medical Association (PMA) on 23 and 24 September 2022. Prior to our meeting, we had heard of devastating floods that had covered a third of Pakistan. As such, quite a number of countries' representatives opted to attend virtually.

My colleagues were also apprehensive about me going, but my PMA colleagues called me personally and persuaded me to go as I had to chair the assembly.

Getting down to business

I flew to Karachi via Dubai and was warmed by the hospitality experienced from the moment I stepped off the aerobridge in the airport. They escorted me through customs and immigration in a most speedy and expedient manner.

It was indeed heartening meeting up with the colleagues that we had been seeing only virtually for the past two years. Dr Sajjad and Dr Wasiq of the PMA were welcoming and generous; we were also pleased to meet up with Dr Angelique Coetzee and Dr Akhtar Hussain who hailed from South Africa. Dr Coetzee is the doctor who suspected that a new variant had emerged in Gauteng province where she practises and asked her colleagues to sequence it. That variant was the Omicron strain, and she is now globally acknowledged as the doctor who first spotted that a new variant had emerged.

Our meeting was graced by our colleagues from the Malaysia Medical Association and the surprising appearance of Dr Francesco and Dr Jean Ciarlo of the Brazil Medical Association.

We held a hybrid General Assembly, and were joined virtually by our colleagues from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines. The meeting also encompassed symposiums on the topic





of "Healthcare in COVID-19", including the prestigious Takemi Taro oration that was delivered by Dr Tipu Sultan. Dr Takemi Taro was the President of the Japan Medical Association from 1957 to 1982. He is venerated for his leadership and was instrumental to the founding of CMAAO.

The symposium also covered presentations from each nation on their journey of handling COVID-19 in the last two years. We enjoyed the country reports of each National Medical Association, and the various representatives delivered a frank assessment of the current situation in their country. We often learn from each other when we share our areas of difficulties, how we resolved certain issues and how we interacted with our governments. The meeting ended with

the announcement of a donation of a sum of 30,000 USD (42,500 SGD) from CMAAO to the PMA for flood relief efforts.

Appreciating the city

Karachi is a city of 25 million, and the traffic, as with these megacities, is chaotic. Most motorcyclists do not wear helmets and one can often see a family of three perched on one motorcycle. The hotel we stayed in had automated ramps in the ground to stop vehicle attacks, and the security was armed with Kalashnikov AK-47s and pistols. In fact, we noticed that every street in the city had one such armed individual whose job was to secure the street. All malls and hotels had metal detectors, and the airport had fortified pillboxes with machine guns. This was indeed a city under siege.

Despite the security risks, the hospitality was warm and welcoming, carefully thought out and planned. We enjoyed dinners along the coast with grilled meats and shellfish; had the best nasi biryani I ever tasted; had a lovely evening out under the stars at the old colonial building that houses the PMA; and we were brought to the prestigious Karachi Boat Club founded by the British in 1881. The club was along the coast near the port and framed by mangrove swamps that keep the waters clean with its unique ecosystem. The service was impeccable, and the serving staff were dressed in white, crisp formal jackets and pants, with epaulettes reminiscent of naval traditions.

It was certainly an unforgettable meeting. We were indeed overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity of our hosts, coupled with the rather emotional effect of in-person meetings with people you have met online week after week for a long period of two years. It was with heavy hearts when it came to taking our leave, but we were cheered by the thought of meeting up next year in Dhaka, Bangladesh for our next General Assembly. ♦

Legend

1. The opening of CMAAO 2022.
2. A cultural programme and dinner banquet arranged by our hosts
3. Dr Chong with the legendary Dr Angelique Coetzee from South Africa

Dr Chong is about to enter his sixth decade and trying to decide what is important going ahead for the last leg. Is it leaving a legacy, drinking good Pinot noir, reading the good stuff, keeping an active lifestyle, or just enjoying the good company of his friends? He would like your honest opinion!

