

# Lessons from Healthcare Development – 60th Myanmar Medical Conference

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## Myanmar in 2014

After pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest in 2010, Myanmar has been undergoing dramatic political reform. Barack Obama visited the country in 2012, becoming the first US president to do so. His trip also signalled America's re-establishment of economic links with Myanmar, decades after the former prohibited its citizens and businesses from dealing with Myanmar in the 1990s.

Myanmar has palpably opened its borders to economic development in the past few years. The streets are teeming with activity, traffic jams a daily affair, and buildings are being constructed throughout Yangon at a frenzied pace. Hotel rooms are running at full occupancy, even after their rates have been doubled or tripled over the past two years. On the streets of Yangon, camera-toting Caucasian tourists can be seen jostling with troops of Chinese and Japanese businessmen in suits. One interesting observation was that the air quality was very good despite all the development going on. One would have expected choking pollution in a dust-covered environment, but the skies were a deep clear blue and stars were visible at night. This could be attributed to the fact that motorcycles have been banned in the central Yangon city area since 2003.

Myanmar is indeed at a critical juncture of its development. Those who wish to visit Yangon's historical city centre should make a trip there soon, before development transforms the city beyond recognition in a few years' time.

## Myanmar Medical Association

The Myanmar Medical Association (MMA) was founded in 1949, a year after Burmese gained independence from the British. Since 2006, it has been under the leadership of MMA President Prof Kyaw Myint Naing.

MMA is also a member of MASEAN – the Medical Association of South East Asian Nations – of which SMA is the administrative secretariat.

SMA was invited to attend the 60th Myanmar Medical Conference, which was held from 11 to 17 January this year. The venue of the event was the old MMA building, located in a historical tree-lined district of central Yangon, near the south bank of Kandawgyi Lake. Doctors from all over the country attended the annual conference, which is the main forum for the presentation of scientific papers and posters by MMA members on all aspects of Medicine.

At the inaugural ceremony on the first day, the Guest of Honour, Deputy Union Minister for Health, Dr Thein Thein Htay delivered an opening speech, which was followed by an address by MMA President Prof Kyaw.

Dr Keizo Takemi kicked off the the week-long MMA conference with his keynote lecture. Dr Takemi is a member of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, was a member of the House of Councillors of Japan, and was Senior Vice Minister for Health, Labour and Welfare from 2006 to 2007.

In his lecture, "Lessons from Japan's Experience of Universal Health Care", Dr Takemi discussed how his country's healthcare system evolved with the expansion of the middle class after World War 2. In the 1960s, universal health coverage was introduced to make health coverage more equitable for the population. Japan's healthcare system has indeed been effective in improving health outcomes, resulting in a nation with one of the longest life expectancies in the world.

However, Japan now faces problems like reduced economic growth coupled with a rapidly ageing population. There is also a widening gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy, which is the average period of active



**Facing** The old MMA building, located in central Yangon

**Left** Delegates mingling before the conference commenced

living without physical barriers to daily life. This means that there is an urgent need for eldercare services. The lesson for Myanmar or any developing nation is that while there is usually an immediate need to expand a healthy and well-educated middle class, the problem of an ageing population will follow naturally and inevitably after a few decades of growth. Healthcare policies therefore need to thoroughly plan and prepare for issues that arise with an ageing population well before ageing starts.

The first day of the conference ended with the President Dinner to install the new President of MMA, Prof Rai Mra, who had been elected in an earlier annual general meeting. ■



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