

The International Pharmaceutical Students' Federation (IPSF) currently represents around 300,000 pharmacy students in over 60 countries worldwide. In May 2001, immediate past IPSF president Lindsay McClure undertook an IPSF membership promotion tour in south east Asia

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In search of that great god called pharmacy: pharmacy adventures in south east Asia

Thirteen hours, four in-flight movies and three airline meals after leaving London the plane finally touched down at Singapore's Changi Airport. It was 27°C, 84 per cent humidity . . . and still only 7 o'clock in the morning! It was my first visit to Asia and already I was beginning to realise how different the culture is there compared to the UK.

Armed with my handy travel bible, Lonely Planet's 'South East Asia on a Shoestring', I read up on the basics of Singaporean life. Over the past few years, Singapore has earned the reputation of being a "fine city", as there are fines for just about everything! Smoking in public places, littering or spitting can see the offender fined up to US\$5,000. The strict laws have impacted in an unusual way on pharmacy practice. As chewing gum is banned, pharmacies aren't allowed to sell nicotine replacement gum and have to rely on other smoking cessation products.

The main reason for my visit to Singapore was to attend the first IPSF Asia Pacific pharmacy student

symposium. It was the first IPSF event ever to be held in the region and attracted over 300 pharmacy students from Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, India and Singapore. It was certainly like nothing I have ever experienced before.

The first delegation to arrive was the Japanese, complete with a sakura (cherry blossom) tree as a gift for the organising committee. I'm still not sure how they managed to get it past customs, or how long it survived in the Singapore heat!

Being a pharmacy student in Singapore is very different from being a student in Britain. The university has put a huge emphasis on technology with all of the lecture rooms having the latest multimedia equipment. Students are offered subsidies to buy their own laptops and network points have been installed throughout the campus so students can have free internet access.

During my stay, I quickly discovered that Singapore is a culinary paradise, so I couldn't resist trying out some of the

various foods on offer, from barbecued sting-ray to frog’s legs, shark fin soup to “mixed spare parts”! One of the most infamous foods found in Singapore is the durian fruit. Infamous not because of its taste, but because of its pungent smell. Words can’t describe the long-lasting stench produced by the fruit, with shops, buses and hotels across Singapore having clear “No durian” signs up beside the “No smoking” signs. Unfortunately, a few of the delegates at the regional symposium managed to miss the warnings and learned the durian lesson the hard way after leaving the offending fruit in their rooms over night!

Everything about Singapore struck me as unforgettable. The shopping, the sights, the people, the food, the crazy laws, but most importantly the experience, which will stay with me for the rest of my life. After 10 days, I was sad to leave but eagerly awaiting the next stop on my journey. Along with a few students from IPSF’s Asia Pacific regional office, we had arranged to fly to Bangkok to visit the Thai National Union of Pharmacists.

The land of a million Buddhas

“Welcome to the land of smiles,” said the Sunshine Holidays rep as he met us at the airport. Bangkok is a city of contrasts, sprawling expressways and overpasses, busy streets alive with vendors, people living in luxury hotels next to overcrowded slums, and modern technology mixed with tradition and culture. Unfortunately our visit was only for a few days but we were keen to make the most of it.

Students from the local organisation had arranged for us to see some of the most famous sights — from the splendour of the grand palace and Wat Ratchanada to wall-to-wall travellers in Khao San Road. There was also time to see a few of the Buddhas! The Golden Buddha, Standing Buddha, Sitting Buddha, Lucky Buddha, and of course who could resist buying a few Buddha souvenirs!

A trip to Bangkok would also not be complete without a trip on a tuk-tuk (a three- wheel vehicle that takes two passengers, or more commonly three or

four at a squeeze). They are definitely not for the faint of heart. One of the things that make them such a great way to get around is that they are small. They can pull around buses and trucks; or into the narrow space between the lanes of traffic or even scarier, into the opposite lane, to jump to the front of traffic at the lights.

During our visit to Bangkok, we attended the orientation day for Thailand’s first year pharmacy students at Chulalongkorn University. As we arrived in the morning, we heard the sound of strong rhythmic drumbeats and dancing students, as the 700 first year students from the country’s 12 schools of pharmacy learned their school of pharmacy’s very own pharmacy dance. After trying our best to dance the Thai way, we joined the students for their induction ceremony and prepared to give the first years a promotional talk about IPSF.

One of the students had agreed to translate the presentation into Thai but five minutes before we were about to go on, disaster struck. Nerves had got the better of our translator and none of the other students felt confident enough to do it. I racked my brain to try to remember some of those useful Thai phrases that had been listed in the guide book but didn’t think that “Where is the bar?” and “Do you have something non-spicy” was going to help very much at this point. There was nothing else for it: we had to introduce the Thai students to the IPSF lecture room wave. I’m not sure how much of the talk they understood, but we definitely had fun trying to teach 700 students with little English how to do a Mexican wave across a crowded lecture theatre.

The day ended with the Thai students taking a ceremonial pharmacy student oath before heading back to their various universities, while we made our way to Siam Square for some serious shopping. I was happily walking along looking in the shop windows when suddenly I heard the shout, “elephant!” I looked up and sure enough, I was seconds from being hit by

an oncoming elephant in downtown Bangkok. Definitely a Kodak moment! Elephants are a real problem in the city. They have the same life span as humans and were originally bred to be workers in the forests. As technology has improved and they are no longer needed, their owners can't afford to cover the costs of feeding them for the rest of their lives, so the result is a lot of unemployed hungry elephants on the streets of Bangkok.

The god of pharmacy

Later in the year, I found myself having to make a 24-hour stop over in Tokyo, so what better to do than to meet up with students from the Japanese Association of Pharmacy Students to find out more about pharmacy in Japan.

Ever since the 17th century, Dosho-machi Street in Osaka has had the reputation of being the centre of pharmacy in Japan as it's where many of the countries leading pharmacy wholesalers and manufacturers are based. It's also where on November 22

and 23 each year, people from across the country come to mark the Shinno festival to celebrate Japan's gods of pharmacy.

Shinno was the Chinese king who is believed to have written the oldest Chinese herbal pharmacopoeia. His legend spread to Japan and to this day he is still worshipped as a god of pharmacy. Japan also has its own pharmacy god called Sukuna-hikona no Mikoto, but over the years the legends of Shinno and Sukuna-hikona no Mikoto have been merged and now both are worshipped as pharmacy gods at a special shrine in Dosho-machi Street.

The symbol of the Shinno festival is branches of bamboo grass with a hanging paper tiger. It's another tradition stemming from the important role that pharmacy has played in Japan's history. Around 180 years ago, Japan was struck by a serious cholera epidemic. The pharmacy wholesalers and manufacturers on the Dosho-machi Street gathered to discuss the situation and to develop a potion to combat the disease. They developed a pill from the bones of a tiger and it was said to be so effective that it stopped the spread of the disease. During the festival people crowd around the shrine to the pharmacy gods, holding bamboo grass and paper tigers,

believing that by doing so they will ward off evil.

Japan still has a very young national pharmacy student organisation, but we hope that it won't be long before we can welcome them as members of the federation. After sampling my fair share of suchi and sake, it was back to the airport and back on another plane, a little wiser about pharmacy in Japan, clutching an address book full of new friends and wondering where my next pharmacy adventure would be.

However you view your profession, be it like a religion or just a day job, there is a whole world of opportunities out there waiting to be taken. So don't sit and think about it — get involved! ☺

IPSF activities

IPSF's main activities include a 12-day annual congress, student-led health education campaigns, a global student exchange programme and a village project in Tanzania, the Neema Project.

There are a number of opportunities for you to visit Asia with IPSF over the next few years. The 3rd IPSF Asia Pacific regional pharmacy symposium will take place in Thailand in May 2003; the 49th IPSF congress will take place in Singapore in July 2003; and the FIP/IPSF students' day will take place in Sydney, Australia, in August 2003. More information is available on the IPSF website. It is also possible to apply for a student exchange placement in one of IPSF's member countries in Asia.

The British Pharmaceutical Students Association (BPSA) is IPSF's member organisation in Great Britain and as a BPSA member you are automatically a member of IPSF. For more information on IPSF, why not check out the IPSF website (www.ipsf.org) or e-mail ipsf@ipsf.org