

Conference Report: 9th International Society for Mountain Medicine World Congress

I travelled to Taipei, capital of the beautiful island state of Taiwan (officially the Republic of China), in November 2012 to attend the International Society for Mountain Medicine (ISMM) World Congress. I have been supervising a special study module in high altitude medicine at NUI Galway for years now and I receive regular queries from other travel medicine physicians, GPs and mountaineering guides about the health risks associated with travel to high altitude. It was good to get up to date at this meeting. I had attended the World Congress when it was held in Aviemore, Scotland previously. Taipei was almost as difficult to reach but definitely worth the effort! The city has a pleasant mix of Chinese and western influences, not dissimilar to Hong Kong, but not as developed. The people were polite if somewhat shy but very warm and welcoming. The food of course was delicious although you have to shop around; it's not as keenly priced as you might wish. I got the impression that it was a very safe city from a traveller's perspective.

Departing President Marco Maggiorini from Switzerland handed over the reins to incoming President Buddha Basnyat of Nepal. Because I had recruited 10 student members to the ISMM and because we have a national travel medicine society, Ireland qualified to hold a place on the Executive Council and I was elected to this role at the Annual General Meeting on the basis of my practical and academic experience in high altitude medicine.

The programme opened with a special lecture by Tomotsu Nakamura from Japan who gave a lecture titled *East of the Himalaya – The Final Frontier, The Alps of Tibet, and Beyond*. Nakamura was recently quoted as saying, "Some convince themselves that veiled mountains in the greater ranges are an experience of the past" ...but "Eastern Tibet has an incredibly vast and complex topography that holds countless unclimbed summits and beckons a lifetime's search." Professor John West, editor of the journal *High Altitude Medicine and Biology* gave a wonderful lecture on the current state of high altitude physiology, from the contribution of molecular biology to our understanding of the adaptation of native highlanders to the oxygen enrichment of train carriages in China and workplaces in the Andes and Hawaii.

A series of excellent parallel symposia followed, covering topics such as genes and altitude adaptation, preparing for high altitude exposure, prevention and treatment of acute

mountain sickness (AMS), risk evaluation for severe AMS, iron metabolism at high altitude and the pathophysiology, prevention and treatment of high altitude cerebral oedema and high altitude pulmonary oedema. Former President Peter Hackett led a very interesting discussion on climbing “by fair means”, which contributed to the debate raging about the use of medications and supplemental oxygen on high peaks. Peter himself, who is based in Colorado in the US, was fascinated to learn from me about Castle Hackett, a 13th century Tower house in Belclare, County Galway, built by the Norman Hackett family who established themselves along the east side of Lough Corrib, having driven the O’Flahertys across the lake to Connemara. I felt suitably conquered by his clan and we enjoyed a good laugh about it over coffee!

Makalu Gau from Taiwan gave a special lecture recounting his experiences as one of the survivors of the famous mountaineering disaster which occurred on Mt Everest in the spring of 1996 and subsequently described by Jon Krakauer in the book ‘Into Thin Air’. He gave a fascinating account of his struggle to return to the mountains after suffering from severe frostbite during that terrible tragedy on the world’s highest peak.

Further symposia dealt with topics including circulation control at high altitude, metabolic changes at high altitude, exercise at high altitude and athletic training to improve athletic performance. Eric Swenson provided a comprehensive review of the management of pre-existing pulmonary conditions in high-altitude travellers. There were three sets of oral presentations, comprising 13 speakers, with topics ranging from meteorological conditions on the South Col of Everest (8000m) and the risk of hypothermia in extreme altitude mountaineers to experiences in teaching mountain medicine across the world. On the final day there was an interesting session on rescue medicine and the future of telemedicine in mountaineering.

I enjoyed this conference and pledged the support of the TMSI in improving awareness of high altitude and mountain medicine amongst our members through our regional seminars and specialised courses. If you are interested in becoming a member of the ISMM, please visit their website at www.ismmed.org. The current cost for members of the TMSI is approximately €80 with a reduced rate for students or trainees.

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