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Editorial

The Poetry of Diabetes and the Wuhan APACPH Conference

Colin Binns, MBBS, PhD, Wah Yun Low, MSc, PhD, and Yun Zhao, PhD

As this issue of the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health (APJPH)* goes to press, we will be meeting in Wuhan for the 45th Asia Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health (APACPH) Conference. Wuhan has a 3500-year history of education and scholarship, a tradition that is continued in the modern universities located here. During the eighth century, the Golden Age of the Tang Dynasty, one of China’s greatest classical poets, Li Bai (李白), traveled around the country writing poetry and sampling the local wines. He was born in the far West, probably in present-day Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan where his family was in exile from southeast China. At the age of 5 years, his family moved to Jiangyou in Sichuan Province, where he studied the classics and gained skills in Chinese martial arts. There is a statue to his memory in that city, which has survived the recent Great Western China Earthquake.1 Later during his travels, Li Bai stopped for a period in Wuhan as he travelled along the Yangtze River. He is remembered for naming the city as “River City” (江城). Wuhan is the city’s present name dating from early in the 20th century following several amalgamations. Because of its beautiful location on the mighty river with its lakes and mountains nearby, Wuhan will always be thought of as a beautiful “River City.”

One of the best known poems that Li Bai is remembered for is his poem “To the Moon” (静夜思) (which is only 20 words long) and its descriptive of nature while the wandering poet reveals his longing for his home.

*Seeing the moonlight in front of my bed—*  
*I took it for frost on the ground!*  
*Lifting my head to watch the bright moon,*  
*I thought of hometown when I bent my head*

The round shape of full moon in Chinese culture has many meanings, including unity, completeness, health, peaceful, and immortality. The moon was seen as a symbol of protection. The image of a full moon rising over the river is also an appropriate one for public health. The circle represents completeness or wholeness, which is the goal of public health. Public health is characterized by scientific assessment and rigorous cost-effectiveness evaluations as we seek to make individuals and populations whole, using the best of a seething river of options made available in our modern world. We could really stretch the analogy and imagine the “hometown” he is referring to his early origins, which is an increasingly important topic in public health. Li Bai wrote more than 1000 poems before he died at the age of 58 and is remembered as one of

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China’s greatest poets. We are looking forward to seeing again the great river of Wuhan that inspired Li Bai and to having a very fruitful APACPH Conference.

As our conference ends, the month of November begins, a month of emphasis on diabetes. In no area is the “Whole Person/Whole Community” approach more important than in addressing the increasing rates of diabetes. This will be a major topic of the conference and the World Diabetes Day on November 14 will focus on education and prevention. When APACPH was founded 3 decades ago, diabetes was hardly a major public health issue in our region although the signs were beginning to emerge. In a 2011 review, Danaei et al. estimated that worldwide, the number of people with diabetes increased from 153 million (127-182 million) in 1980, to 347 million (314-382 million) in 2008. In parts of the Asia Pacific region, the prevalence of diabetes has increased by 50% or more. Currently, there are an estimated of 114 million adults with diabetes in China, a dramatic increase in a country where 3 decades ago, had a mainly rural population consuming a vegetarian diet with a low rate of obesity. In assessing the current epidemic, the Global Alliance against Chronic Disease has stated that much is known about the science of type 2 diabetes mellitus. What is now needed is a focus on “implementation of existing policies, present knowledge, and proven interventions.”

This is now the challenge for APACPH. Public health brings skills in health promotion and epidemiology, which are essential for implementing large-scale population change. It is up to us, our members, and our students to educate for the population-wide changes in lifestyle and diet that will stop the epidemic from increasing further. The World Diabetes Day and the APACPH Conference in Wuhan provide us with an opportunity to strengthen old programs and begin new ones to reverse the diabetes tide.

In this month’s issue of APJPH, we continue our series of systematic reviews devoted to public health issues in our region. This month’s review deals with optimizing access to health services in Nepal. Because of the current importance of chronic disease in our region, we have research articles dealing with cardiovascular and respiratory disease and cervical cancer.

References