

# Learning from Others Can Advance One's Wisdom

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**T**he International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA) is one of the largest international student organizations. Established after the Second World War by a group of European medical students based on their passion and ideals, currently the IFMSA has about 100 member states located in five continents, including Taiwan. The 58<sup>th</sup> General Assembly is held in Tunisia, Africa, from March 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009. I was extremely lucky to have the opportunity to participate in this significant event.

This was an exceptional and meaningful activity, and the assembly is themed on *Conflict and Health*, with matching subjects in each division. I took part in the Vice President for External Affairs Forum.



The 58<sup>th</sup> IFMSA General Assembly was held in Tunisia

## Medical Students Understand More than the Medical Science

The subject of the pre-General Assembly is *Media and Conflict*. It is worth mentioning that this is the first time for the IFMSA to select a subject not directly relating to the medical science, because the consensus that medical students should have a broad horizon to engage in various affairs has been formed gradually and resulted in a breakthrough in mentality.



The author (standing) made a presentation in a session.



The author (right) took a picture with a Slovenian delegate. The poster behind them is about a project of the Teddy Bear Hospital.

In media related issues, ethical issues are highlighted, and we concluded the following main areas of dilemmas:

(1) **publicity v.s. sustainability**: should the media focus on the latest, the most popular news, or should they concern important and far-reaching issues? Some do not

think a dilemma ever exists in these two dimensions; however, when resources and time are limited, a priority must be set between the two dimensions.

(2) **visibility v.s. respect**: how much and to what degree can the media investigate and explore facts? How can a balance be achieved between news appeal and

respect for the persons involved?

(3) **fact inflation and honesty**: in order to showcase certain standpoint or uniqueness, news reports sometimes selectively present facts, but does this violate the code of honesty?

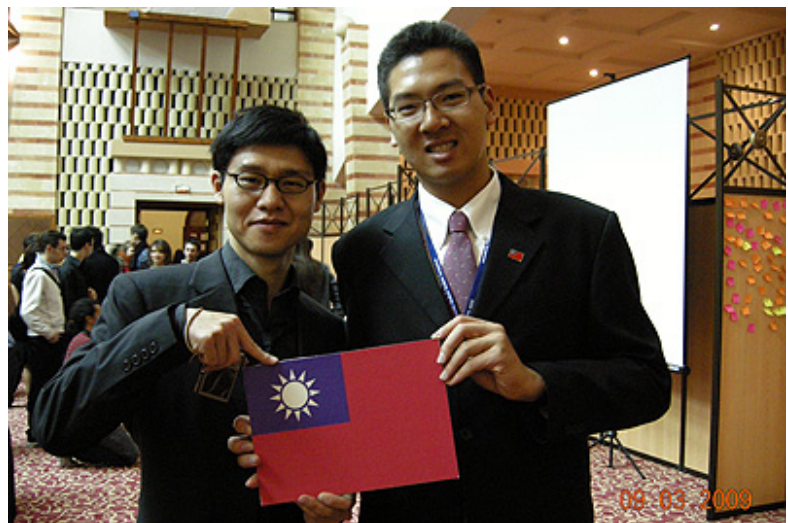
(4) **appeal to pity v.s. human dignity**: do the media report out of compassion or the thrill of peeping?

Though it is not possible to reach a concrete conclusion from the above discussions, the overarching principle is humane perspective and compassion. The end note of this forum is "Honger is nieuws" (Famine is news): we need to ponder and examine deeply when people consider famine is but only another news image!

## Nothing is Impossible Apology is Crucial

The sessions for Vice President for External Affairs (VPE) gathered the VPEs from various chapters of the IFMSA to discuss the problems they face in their respective chapters. Such discussion can catalyze valuable ideas and give one a clearer picture of others' circumstances and to compare and contrast them.

During the five-day sessions, the subjects are: sharing and exchange experiences among the chapters, marketing, public relations, corporate identity, relations with NGOs and fundraising, etc.



The author (right) and 2008-9 President of the IFMSA-Taiwan, You-Chuan Chien; in their hands is the Taiwan voting card.

We used real examples encountered in our chapters and worked out a solution plan with group discussion, then present the result to the whole group and exchange ideas. The most important lesson I learned is that no matter in operation or in training, Taiwanese students are definitely no less competitive than foreign students. Though the IFMSA is a Euro-centered organization, the Taiwan chapter has a long-term legacy that new officers or members can soon understand the general picture.

Because the challenges each chapter would face are similar, more experienced members can come up with effective solutions. As the delegate of Taiwan, I am very pleased to share our experience with other counterparts.

It is outstanding of the participating medical students to emphasize that once we make a mistake, we should be brave to shoulder the responsibilities and apologize, which I can agree no more! Even as officers of the world's largest student organization, you cannot be exempt from making mistakes, hence it is essential to learn the art of apology. I learned to face various affairs with a humble attitude, and I consider this the best reward I gained from the VPE sessions!

## **Acting Globally Means Both Exchange and Implementation**

Due to geographical and political circumstances, Taiwanese students rarely have opportunities to engage in international events; even if they can, usually the events involve single or homogeneous countries. The IFMSA is the largest international student organization, which entails rare and valuable opportunities to connect to assorted background medical students in one time.

The IFMSA deals with a wide range of affairs, with six Standing Committees such as Medical Education, Human Rights and Peace, Reproductive Health including AIDS, Public Health, Professional Exchange and Research Exchange. Each committee has different functions and the GA is the exchange platform for participating countries.

From signing exchange agreements among countries, facilitating international collaboration projects to cultural exchange, in only 10 days we have gained intensive and abundant experiences! Some might doubt whether there would be any practical result from the so-called exchange events, and how many people can apply what they have seen in these events when they are back? To me, the answer depends on to what extent you have been influenced. For example, during the project presentation session, I was especially impressed by the Egyptian medical students' hepatitis A prevention promotion project; in addition, the UK's city water pollution prevention and restoration project, Ghana's national hygiene week event in collaboration with the government, and Japan's humanitarian nuclear bomb explosion summer camp, etc., are best examples of active promotion of health from various aspects in participating countries.

If we can keep these perceptions dear and spread the inspiration and passion to everyone, I believe we medical students can contribute something to Taiwan!



Mr. Wei-Hsiang Liao of Department of Medicine, NCKU (left) and an Arabic medical student delegate.



A group photo of all Taiwanese delegates.

**Mr. Wei-Hsiang Liao's blog: <http://www.wretch.cc/blog/liaowh>**

*Translated by Helen Chang*

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