My Year as a Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow

"Once you have travelled, the voyage never ends, but is played out over and over again in the quietest chambers. The mind can never break off from the journey."

Despite being back for a month now, the quote by Pat Conroy holds true as snippets of my journey over the past year come back in flashes as I go about with the business of life. My Hubert H. Humphrey (HHH) journey started the moment I received news from the Malaysian-American Commission on Educational Exchange (MACCE) that I had been selected as the 2014-2015 Humphrey fellow for Malaysia. Having this honour was made even more meaningful as I was encouraged to pursue this fellowship by a fellow alumna from the Ministry of Health – Dr Goh Pik Pin, Director of the Clinical Research Center.

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The HHH fellowship is one of many Fulbright programmes open to Malaysians. This programme is unique in the sense as it brings accomplished mid-career professionals of various fields to the United States for 11 months of non-degree academic coursework as well as professional development activities. This includes an affiliation in top governmental and non-governmental agencies.

The many fields offered for this fellowship include agricultural and rural development, communications or journalism, economic development or finance and banking, educational administration, planning and policy, HIV/AIDS policy and prevention, human resource management, law and human rights, natural resources and environmental management, public health policy and management, public policy analysis and public administration, substance abuse education, treatment and prevention, teaching of English as a foreign language, technology policy and management, trafficking in persons, policy and prevention and lastly urban and regional planning.
What I really enjoyed about the fellowship was the flexibility it offered in designing a programme that was best suited for each individual’s learning objectives and professional needs. Based on our individual learning curves, we could select from classes, online lectures, peer learning, seminars, workshops, conferences and even professional attachments. With the availability of course descriptions and syllabi online, I was able to select the classes I planned to pursue during the fall semester even before stepping foot in the United States.

Before I knew it, I was on a plane bound for Richmond, Virginia. My host campus, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) was one of two health host campuses, the other being Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. VCU was host to 11 fellows including myself, from the countries of Afghanistan, Egypt, Ghana, Jordan, Kosovo, Myanmar, Pakistan and Paraguay. Although we were all linked by the common objective of improving health care policies in our country, the specifics were quite diverse. We had an architect seeking to rehabilitate war-torn hospitals, a psychologist studying substance abuse treatment and prevention, a doctor striving to build resilience in youths against high-risk behaviours, a nutritionist working on cancer prevention and locally, myself, a family physician seeking to improve sexual reproductive health practices and healthcare equity among marginalised women.

Despite housing a moderate-sized city campus, VCU has a lot to offer. Its medical campus, the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) happens to be the largest and oldest medical school in the state of Virginia since its establishment in 1838. Their teaching hospital, VCU Medical Center is a 779 bed state-of-the-art health facility and one of 35 designated Ebola centres in the United States. During my time there, the medical centre saw some action, as it was the height of the Ebola outbreak. An interesting fact to note, Dr Patch Adams (brought to life on the silver screen by the late Robin Williams) was a graduate of the Class of 1971.

My days in VCU were a whirlwind of classes, seminars and workshops. Having pursued my tertiary education in Malaysia, it was such a breath of fresh air to take a break from didactic teaching styles and be immersed in experiential learning. The lecturers merely functioned as facilitators and we were constantly encouraged to question, seek and debate. I was also taken aback by how accessible they were to their students and how open they were to comments, criticisms and new ideas.

One of the more notable classes I took was Community Interventions. As part of the course requirements, I had the opportunity to conduct a needs consultation for a refugee resettlement agency in Richmond. Based on data from the US Office of Newcomer Services, a total of 243 refugees comprised of mainly peoples from Afghanistan, Bhutan, Congo, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Vietnam were resettled in Richmond in 2013. From my consultation, after housing and transportation, mental health issues were the most pressing health need for this community. Considering the fact that many of them have experienced fear and trauma of being persecuted for reasons including race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion before finding refuge in the United States, this came as no surprise. With the help of my medical colleagues in my cohort, I was able to plan a multi-disciplinary intervention that would not only screen for depression, anxiety and
stress but also provide them with coping skills and also referrals for further psychiatric management if needed.

One of the most looked-forward-to event of the Humphrey year was the Global Leaders Forum (GLF). The GLF was the only time all 171 fellows from 98 different nations came together for five days of discourse revolving around the theme of climate change. In preparation, my cohort had compiled a presentation about how climate change affected health via food scarcity, lack of potable water, spread of disease and lack of capacity to mitigate change post disasters. A highlight of the GLF was the diplomatic reception at the Benjamin Franklin room in the Department of State. This beautiful room had not only seen many Head of States but was also a depository of many Americana arts and artifacts. During the reception, I was acquainted with fellow Malaysians Humphrey alumni as well as the then Education Attaché Officer at the Embassy of Malaysia, Encik Nazrol Marzuke.

As the year flew by, I had the opportunity to travel to the other host campuses for enhancement workshops. In the depths of winter, a few of us braved the -21°C temperatures to learn from the crisis management and leadership experts at the Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. Despite the freezing temperatures, we were warmed by the hospitality of the host fellows and grateful for all the knowledge and skills gained from lectures and simulation exercises on how to mitigate and manage crisis situations.

At the Social Justice Workshop hosted by the Rollins School of Public Health in Emory University, we were inspired by real life leaders who were using their influence and experience to bring justice, sociopolitical reform, restoration and peace in this troubled day and age. During a visit to the Martin Luther King Centre in downtown Atlanta, two inspiring quotes of his that still resound in my head till now are "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter" and "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy". Indeed, these two quotes are as apt today as they were during Dr King's march for equality as we consider equitable healthcare for all regardless of gender, age, ethnicity and geographical location.

Another inspiring speaker at the workshop was President Jimmy Carter who talked about his peace-building efforts, projects to eradicate guinea worm, prevent malaria and promoting equal opportunities for the girl-child via his work through the Carter Center. Despite his age, President Carter and his wife, Mrs Rosalyn Carter still spend much of their time in third world and developing countries overseeing the many projects they spearhead.

In order to gain more practical and hands-on experience, I chose to do two professional affiliations at both a local and regional level. My first affiliation with the Richmond City Health District (RCHD) clinical services team allowed me a first-hand experience with the various healthcare and insurance schemes in the United States including the highly controversial Obamacare. I wasn’t surprised to discover how much more expensive family planning methods were in the United States compared to those available back home. In Malaysia, we get them at a fraction of the price, thanks to generous subsidies by the Ministry of Health. It was encouraging to note that Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC), a method I have been passionately promoting, was more widely accepted in younger women. Based on my experiences in RCHD, I hope to empower my patients to make wise sexual reproductive health choices as this has repercussion on their family’s health as well in the long run. I also had the privilege of presenting my work on LARC among rural women in the Kapit district of Sarawak at various international conferences including the 23rd Annual Women’s Health Congress in Washington DC and the InWomen’s International Group Conference in Arizona.

My second affiliation with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the WHO Office for the Americas was concentrated on the identification and reduction of reproductive, maternal, neonatal, child and adolescent health inequities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Having concentrated on clinical medicine for most of my career, this was an exciting foray into statistics, health indicators, equity strinifiers, measures of inequality and health economics. I do believe as doctors, we are in a position to champion social justice by ensuring universal access to quality healthcare. I also believe we have the power and resources to herald the change needed to do so.

Some other memorable highlights of my year include attending the 70th Anniversary celebrations of the
singing of the UN Charter with guest of honour, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and female education activist and the youngest Nobel peace prize awardee, Malala Yousafzai.

An educational visit to the world-renowned Johns Hopkins primary care and research facility was arranged for us. We got to hear first-hand from the Director of their addictive substances research team about some of their trials treatments and community-based interventions. While in Baltimore, we also stopped by the REACH substance abuse drop-in centre to learn about their highly successful peer mentoring and recovery coach programme.

I was selected for a week-long community college residency programme in Ivy Tech Community College, Fort Wayne, Indiana. During my week there, I was exposed to the community college system, an alternative pathway for affordable tertiary education. Many consider the Associates degree awarded by community colleges inferior but in reality, it is a good option for those already in the workforce who are seeking qualification or for those with limited time and resources. During the week, I assisted in a medical terminology class targeting those who were planning to get training in the health field. I was also privileged to visit various primary care units and community immunisation clinics, including those among the Amish community.

Despite the rather busy schedule, I managed to steal some time to be acquainted with American hockey or ice hockey, for us. The Komets is Fort Wayne’s minor league team in the ECHL. With the puck flying across the ice at 95mph-100mph, this is a fast-paced game that kept me on the edge of my seat. It also happens to be the only sport where opponents are allowed to legally fight with each other!

Toward the close of my Humphrey year, I also had the opportunity to collaborate with the Embassy of Malaysia in Washington to give a health talk to their staff and have a “Doctor in the house” question and answer session. Post talk, I was treated to a much missed Malaysian staple — nasi lemak and teh tarik.

All throughout my year, there were various opportunities to give back to the local community and share Malaysia’s rich culture and heritage not only with the other fellows in my cohort but also with students in VCU and a nearby community college. Contrary to popular belief, altruism is still pretty much alive among the Americans I met. I knew many who would not hesitate to spare an hour or two a week to participate in community service and volunteering. Many actually encouraged their children to participate as well. As a group, we collaborated with Habitat for Humanity to build affordable housing in the greater Richmond area. In line with Stop Hunger Now’s effort to ensure children do not have to worry about their growling stomachs while attending school, we packed fortified rice meals to be distributed to schools in the developing countries. We also collaborated with a local faith group to provide meals for the homeless taking refuge in a park near the campus. Personally, I had a chance to share my experiences as a rural family physician in Song, Sarawak with various audiences. Also, I could not pass up the opportunity to showcase some of Malaysia’s multicultural heritage and progress at the local Rotary Club meetings. Sadly, I also had to field questions about the missing MH370 and unfortunate MH17 planes.

As I reflect on my journey thus far, it has been one of personal growth as I am constantly pushing my own boundaries to see if I can stretch out a little further beyond my comfort zone. Professionally, this sojourn has opened my eyes to the wider aspects of medicine, holistic health and social justice. This experience has also been a platform for me to build lasting and productive ties with my American and international counterparts. However, as all travellers know, the journey and not the arrival matters (T.S. Eliot). Thus my journey has only just begun!