

Joining forces on a regional level



Angsamerah visiting Bangkok on the occasion of the 1st Assembly of the Regional Network on HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health 2016

Angsamerah Institution has been an important regional partner of the Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine (ASHM) since late 2012. Angsamerah's role within the partnership had been to maximize ASHM's contribution to its partners and members in Indonesia, particularly the Indonesian Medical Association (IDI). Moreover, Angsamerah Institution and ASHM have collaborated on a project aimed at strengthening the Indonesian health workforce, by equipping general practitioners, in particular from the private sector, with comprehensive basic knowledge related to the clinical management of HIV, STIs, viral hepatitis, tuberculosis and recreational drug use, thus strengthening the private sector's contribution to the national sexual and reproductive health programs.

On the basis of several years of successful collaboration and Angsamerah's strong track record of establishing innovative models of private sexual health care delivery, ASHM invited Angsamerah to participate in the 1st Assembly of the Regional Network on HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health 2016 in Bangkok, which took place between the 15th and 17th of January 2016. During the assembly Angsamerah was represented by Dr. Nurlan Silitonga, founder and director of Angsamerah Institution, and Felix Neuenschwander, manager of the partnership division.

The assembly was attended by close to 60 members of national and regional professional societies and individuals and agencies working in HIV, viral hepatitis and sexual health from across Asia and the Pacific. During the three days

speakers representing a wide range of international agencies, academic and research organizations, and professional societies showcased what is working well and how this has been achieved. Speakers also highlighted past challenges faced in their respective countries and difficulties ahead.

Dr. Nurlan Silitonga had been selected to be one of the speakers and give a presentation about the innovative and successful work Angsamerah has been doing with general practitioners, supported by ASHM and other stakeholders. Dr. Nurlan pointed out how Angsamerah has established itself as a training and learning center and "incubator" for health care professionals from across Indonesia, in particular general practitioners. She then explained that Angsamerah's training and support package consists of workshops, study tours, bedside teaching trainings and work placements at the Angsamerah clinics. The innovative approach combines both theoretical and practical components, comprising of clinical skills development, business strategy aspects, and personnel development. Dr. Nurlan also illustrated how the support package for general practitioners is linked to Angsamerah's long-term vision of contributing to the reformation of the Indonesian health system by creating a network of 100 private clinics and practices across Indonesia (Happy Program), providing access to quality health care to an ever increasing number of patients.

The presentations and resulting discussions opened a dialogue between the regional organizations and there was much room to explore how they can work together to share and exchange ideas and



resources, and collaborate in the future. During the discussions it was pointed out that remarkable things have been achieved over the years, for instance in relation to the universal access to HIV treatment. In the year 2000 less than 100'000 people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) have accessed treatment, by the end of 2015 this number has increased to more than 15'000'000 on ART. However, viral hepatitis and other STIs, which affect by far more people in Asia and the Pacific, have not seen a similar response. In this regard more advocacy will need to be done - by professional groups, civil society organizations, the pharmaceutical industry, and activists – an undertaking more challenging than ever amidst widespread funding cuts. Funding constraints also pose a huge challenge to the future HIV response, particularly in countries classified as middle income countries, and we will need to be vigilant that progress made over the last two decades will not be reversed. Of particular concern is also the ongoing stigmatization and in some countries criminalization of key affected population groups, which bear the brunt of the HIV epidemic.

While the Assembly could not come up with an answer or magic formula as to how the funding crisis can be overcome, or how members of the regional network will be able to continue their work amidst financial constraints, plans were nevertheless made to step up regional coordination and collaboration between professional societies and agencies working in the field of HIV, viral hepatitis and sexual health. This will allow us to learn from each other's successes and failures, pool resources where possible, make increased

use of local experts for trainings and mentoring in the region, strengthen clinical and social research agendas, and create an online platform for knowledge and information exchange. Angsamerah feels grateful and privileged to have been able to attend this first Assembly, which overall has been a great success.

Apart from the Assembly, the visit to Bangkok also offered Angsamerah a chance to catch up with colleagues and regional partners, and pay a visit to two sexual health clinics. On the morning of the last day of our stay in Bangkok, we had time to visit the Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Center, which began operating in late 1989. We had an appointment with Khun Somsri, who is the head of the social and behavior department. From her we learned more about the impressive work the Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Center has been doing over the period of more than two decades. And we also made use of the opportunity to introduce ourselves and explain about Angsamerah's work and discussed about potential areas of collaboration. The Research Center hosts the renowned Anonymous Clinic, which was founded by the Thai Red Cross in 1991. The Anonymous Clinic became the first of its kind in Asia to be exempt from revealing the names of patients with HIV to the government. Without asking the real names and addresses of its patients, the clinic provides HIV and STI testing, care and treatment, anal and vaginal pap smears, annual health checkups, and nutritional assessment and counselling. In 2009 the Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Center established the Men's Health Clinic within the same premises, catering specifically to men who love other men. And in late 2015 the



Tangerine Community Health Center had been launched, the first transgender specific health center in Asia, providing psychosocial counselling, hormone administration, and pap smears. The clinics hosted within the Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Center are hugely popular and attract several hundred clients each day.

Our last destination on our Bangkok trip was a clinic and drop-in center operated by SWING (Service Workers in Group) in the heart of Patpong, one of Bangkok's tourist-oriented red light districts. The clinic, drop-in center, and office of SWING, which can be described as a community based sex worker rights organization, occupy the 5th and 6th floors of a building, which also houses a massage parlor called Super Pussy. The building is flanked by numerous other entertainment establishments, where sex services are sold and bought. Even though we arrived without prior notice, we were welcomed in an exceedingly warm manner. We were asked to sit down on a meeting table in the cozy office and shortly after were joined by Gitar, Program Manager at SWING, who spent the next one hour with us explaining about SWING's work and leading us through the clinic and drop-in center. According to Gitar the creation of SWING dates back to 2004. Its core vision is to protect and promote the human rights of sex workers. SWING works with sex workers of all gender, cultures and nationalities, across three peer-led drop-in centers in tourist hot-spots of Thailand, where sex work is widespread. SWING's work includes engaging with highly marginalized sex workers, including HIV+ sex workers, those who lack access to stable accommodation, sex workers who use drugs, and

migrant sex workers. After an interesting discussion in the office, we were led down to the 5th floor, where the clinic and drop-in center are located. As it was still early (around lunch time), the drop-in center, which provides a safe space for sex workers to relax, hand out, and access a variety of social and clinical services, was not yet busy. The drop-in center is equipped with chairs and sofas, tables, computers, a library, and a small fitness room. Through a door the drop-in center is connected to the SWING Clinic, which provides HIV and STI testing services to mostly sex workers (male, female and transgender). We were very impressed with the clean and orderly clinic environment, the friendly and professional staff, and the efficient service system.

Angsamerah's visit to Bangkok has been a very satisfying and enriching experience overall. It has been a great opportunity to network on a regional level and nurture our relationships with partners from across Asia and the Pacific, and last but not least, make new friends. By joining forces across the region, valuable experiences and knowledge can be shared, resources can be pooled, and local agendas can be aligned with regional priorities, which is of great importance in a world which is increasingly connected.

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