

Commentary

Awakening of AFPA from the forced *Hikikomori* caused by COVID-19 Pandemic Recollection from 2020 to 2023

All over the world, people suffered from COVID-19 pandemic. The reported case of the first COVID-19 patient was from Wuhan, China on December 1, 2019 [1]. The first case of COVID patient reported in Japan was in January 2020. After the outbreak of the epidemic, all meetings and travelling stopped for more than three years. The strict regulation was lifted only in May 2023 in Japan. The Asian Federation of the Psychiatric Associations (AFPA) underwent a very difficult time. Since the First Congress of Asian Psychiatry (1st WCAP) was held in Goa, India in 1997, the AFPA enjoyed the steady development supported by national psychiatric societies in Asia and Pacific.

In February 2019, the 7th WCAP in Sydney was hosted by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP). Malcolm Hopwood was elected the president and Prasad Rao as the president-elect. The 7th WCAP was a great success represented by more than 30 national psychiatric societies in Asia and the Pacific. Participants enjoyed a high quality scientific programme and friendship. But the rosy future of the AFPA was shattered by the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The 8th WCAP) was scheduled to take place in Kolkata, India, in January 2021 hosted by the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS). However, due to the global corona epidemic and resulting travel restrictions, it became impossible to hold the conference with large delegations. Therefore, the meeting was held as a half day Web-meeting in September 2021. The IPS is one of the largest psychiatric associations in the world with not only large number of members in India, but also in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and all over the world. We were extremely grateful to the IPS to hold the 8th WCAP and to keep the light of the AFPA on during the difficult period.

As the tide of COVID-19 pandemic became under control in many Asian countries, the AFPA organised the 9th WCAP) in September 2022 in Hyderabad, India.

The 9th WCAP was supported by the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Psychiatric Federation. The congress was a great success. It provided an excellent opportunity for colleagues in Asia and the Pacific to get together once again to work in promoting mental health care, education, training, and research in among member states. The congress was both exciting and rewarding.

During the World Psychiatric Congress (WPC) in Vienna, Austria, an AFPA board meeting was convened on 29 September 2023, chaired by Prasad Rao, and was attended more than 20 national representatives and the AFPA board members. Rao welcomed Andi J. Tanra, president of Indonesian Psychiatric Society, as the president-elect, who will host the 10th WCAP in Jakarta, Indonesia in 2024.

After the long hibernation, 2024 will be a promising year to the AFPA. The AFPA will play a key rôle in promoting mental health services, research and training for psychiatry in Asia and the Pacific. The AFPA plans to organise the June 2024 International Conference of Asia, Pacific, with SAARC-Psychiatric Federation from June 1 to 2, 2024 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Along with WCAP, the AFPA also organised Regional and International Congresses of Asian Psychiatry during the year when there were no WCAPs. In May 2016, the AFPA collaborated with the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists (SLC Psych) in organising the International congress in Sri Lanka with the theme “New Horizons in Asian Psychiatry,” Samudra Kathriarachchi, then president of SLC Psych, was the host. In 2018, AFPA also collaborated with the Philippines Psychiatric Association (PPA) to organise the international congress with the theme “Advances, Impacts and Future Directions of Psychiatry-the Asian experience.” René M. Samaniego, then the president of PPA hosted the lively congress.

Both AFPA international congresses were very successful with the large number of representatives from Asia and the Pacific. In particular, participants enjoyed friendly and warm atmosphere of the meetings. The 2024 International Congress to be held in Abu Dhabi, 1-2 June, 2024 will be an another excellent opportunity for Asian mental health workers to strengthen their friendship.

The AFPA has a bright future to come. We are certain the AFPA has awakened from

the forced *Hikikomori* (a Japanese term for “phobia to meet persons”) [2] caused by COVID-19 pandemic and will be more active in coming years. We are grateful to Malcolm Hopwood, then president, and then Prasad Rao president-elect, for their tireless effort to sustain the visibility of the AFPA during the difficult period.

Also Afzal Javed, WPA president (2020 - 2023) provided strong support to the AFPA. His encouragement was vital for AFPA’s survival. (The author declares no conflicts of interest in writing this commentary.)

References

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Naotaka Shinfuku

International Center for Medical Research, School of Medicine, Kobe University,
Kobe, Japan

Corresponding author. 1-7, 1104 Momochi-hama, Sawara-ku,
Fukuoka 814-0001, Japan

E-mail: Naotaka Shinfuku <Shinfukunaotaka@gmail.com>

(Editor’s note: Shinfuku is a founding president of the AFPA. Although the Dubai IC was announced as an International Conference, the editor considers conference, congress and meeting as synonyms as Shakespeare said, rose is a rose...)