Asia's Invisible Malaria

An exhibit from the Asia Malaria Images exhibition in Singapore (image by Pearl Gan)
Invisible Asia-Pacific Malaria project

The following piece was written by Prof. J. Kevin Baird, Ph.D., FASTMH (University of Oxford and Eijkman Institute for Molecular Biology, Jakarta, Indonesia) and describes the Invisible Asia-Pacific Malaria project that Pearl has been photographing.

Most of us think of malaria as an African problem. We tend to see malaria as a consequence or symptom of the poverty, geographic isolation, chronic conflicts, and poor economic development that hinders human progress on that continent more than on others. Malaria certainly thrives where impoverished people struggle for access to good healthcare, and malaria is indeed a very serious problem in Africa.

The Asia-Pacific sharply contrasts with Africa – booming economies, hundreds of millions lifted out of poverty, highly developed transportation and telecommunications links, and relative peace and stability. Among the 20 most powerful national economies (members of the influential G20) six are in the Asia-Pacific. Asian schools produce students representing nations that consistently occupy the top 5 ranks in abilities in mathematics, reading, and science. The Asia Pacific harvests extraordinary wealth by exceptionally well-educated populations. Surely, one may think, there is no place for malaria in such a dynamic and successful region, but malaria today in the Asia Pacific is pervasive, diverse, and invisible.

Despite the long march of extraordinary economic and political progress over the past half-century, malaria in the Asia-Pacific remains a very significant public health threat and burden. Over 2 billion Asians live at risk of endemic malaria, many tens of millions are infected (perhaps as many as several hundred million) each year and tens of thousands of those do not survive (perhaps as many as several hundred thousand). We cannot be sure of those numbers because the people who live with malaria in the Asia-Pacific are the least visible – the most isolated, poor, and voiceless. This exhibition of the photographic art of Pearl Gan is about them.

In 30 years of working on malaria in the Asia Pacific, I often requested of my local health authority hosts, “Let’s go where your malaria problem is the worst.” This became a familiar journey – paved road became gravel, gravel became dirt, dirt road became impassable. Malaria was its worst where people were isolated and hard to reach. It made their access to economic opportunity difficult, and access to healthcare even harder. This is where malaria lives in the Asia Pacific, the far-flung islands and villages beyond the pavement where people live quietly off our modern “grid” and endure the Asia Pacific malaria problem. The faces, lives, and suffering captured in Pearl’s images struck me as immediately familiar – Yes, these are the people of malaria that I know.

Pearl traveled the backwaters of Asia Pacific, places just like where very many other Asians live – rural, isolated, and relatively impoverished. Her images shatter the caricature of the Asia Pacific of gleaming skyscrapers looming over huge modern cities teaming with over-achieving harried people engaged in industry, commerce and the broader world. We see people all of us can recognize as deeply human by the way Pearl captured them in work, play, warmth, and illness. Their rural environment and isolation, less familiar to us, limits their economic opportunities and access to healthcare. Endemic malaria stalks them, sickening and sometimes killing them. It is very hard for the rest of us to take notice of that because medical investigation and epidemiological reporting of illness and death in rural Asia-Pacific is rarely accomplished by thinly stretched or poorly developed public health services. This is invisibility – where malaria morbidity and mortality cannot be perceived and grounded in a knowable reality. Beginning to undo that is the point of Pearl’s art.

3 August 2016, Prof. J. Kevin Baird, Ph.D., FASTMH, University of Oxford and Eijkman Institute for Molecular Biology

The images on this and following three pages copyright Pearl Gan, Singapore 2017, from the Asia Malaria images exhibition.
An interview with photographer Pearl Gan

Pearl Gan is a Singapore based photographer. Her passion is mainly documentary, portraiture and street photography. Pearl tries to capture everyday people of everyday life. Her works usually capture spontaneous moments. In 2015 Pearl became involved in the “Invisible Asia-Pacific Malaria” project with Professor Kevin Baird from the University of Oxford and Eijkman Institute for Molecular Biology. Pearl has been photographing this important malaria research and those that are affected by it and in this interview Pearl talks to Lisa Jones about her photography and links to malaria research.

Lisa: Pearl, tell us about how you became interested in working with malaria re-search and the people affected by malaria?

Pearl: I met Professor Kevin Baird in September 2015. Kevin saw something in my photographic work that resonated with him and he quickly proposed a collaboration to couple my photography with his Malaria research. This project was aimed at bringing awareness to the “invisibility” of the disease in Asia Pacific. With support of the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit I went on my first trip in December 2015 during the Christmas period and spent my holidays taking photographs in Mae Sot, Thailand. Since that visit I have also been to the Alor Island in Indonesia and Pailin in Cambodia.

The trips widened my limited knowledge of the Malaria problem in Asia Pacific. I witnessed chronic suffering amongst people who are disadvantaged by the poverty and challenges in accessing medical care in remote locations, thus narrowing their chance for survival.

Pearl, tell us why it is so important to photograph this research and what can we learn from it?

Photo-documenting the “faces” of malaria is important to help people across the world see past the invisibility of these isolated and impoverished communities in Asia Pacific.

The project is very humbling for me. I am proud to be involved in this non-profit, humanitarian project and to be part of this Malaria Discovery Journey. Such documentation is important as it shows the World that Malaria in Asia Pacific is not a myth but a fact. In many of the places I visited government health-care amenities are limited. Malaria patients often have to travel long distances to the hospitals to get medical attention they required.

We hope that the collection of photographs will raise awareness of the malaria burden suffered by the inhabitants of these remote communities.

Finally where can our members see your photographs on display?

Our upcoming exhibition this September at Singapore’s National Library will be the first full showing of the highlights from our photographic collection.

Level 8 The Promenade, National Library Board, 100 Victoria Street, Singapore 188064

September 2-29, 2017

Our project website www.asiamalariaimages.com

"We hope that the collection of photographs will raise awareness of the malaria burden."

Art is the creative medium for communication of science. If science is part of an artistic discourse, then art is the engagement medium. It is like an equation and with the right formula: we make the union between art and science work to create a special experience. I see myself as a matchmaker; pairing art and science together into a harmonious union.
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