



the teachers

Taking teaching to the extreme

Versatility, flexibility and adaptability are all skills associated with good teachers. Last year the College took these principles to the extremes! In October 2012, the College's Surgical Teachers Course was delivered simultaneously in two of the most diverse environments imaginable; Hobart, Tasmania and Dili, Timor Leste.

The southernmost and the northernmost courses ever run differed not only in geography, but also in the diversity of environments of climate, culture and language.

However, even though these courses were worlds apart, they both emphasised the same underpinning principle: the imperative to teach is implicit in the work of surgeons, and teaching is a skill that needs to be learnt, just like the technical aspects of surgery.

For many years in Australia and New Zealand, surgeons were expected to teach, but had never been trained or given any guidance in the skills of teaching. Most surgeons picked up teaching skills in an ad hoc manner from their own personal experience of being a student.

It is now recognised that for surgeons to be effective teachers, education about the principles of adult learning is needed. The College's Surgical Teachers course was developed in recognition of this need and has run successfully throughout Australia and New Zealand since 1999.

Recently, the ATCLASS program (The College Humanitarian Aid Program to Timor Leste funded by AusAID, the Australian Government's overseas aid program) achieved a substantial milestone by helping set up the first in-country medical training program under the auspices of the University of Timor Leste. Consequently the opportunity arose to support these diploma courses with a faculty development initiative.

While Timor Leste and Australia share many of the same challenges in the delivery of surgical education, there are also many differences in the context of education.

The Timorese postgraduate diploma courses commenced in July 2012 with five streams: surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics, anaesthesia and internal medicine. The courses will be taught by a faculty of young, recently graduated Timorese specialists.

Dr Joao Pedro Xavier, a recently graduated East Timorese general surgeon has been appointed the director of the new diploma courses and will be assisted by international specialists spending time in Dili.

Dr Joao Pedro's eclectic teaching staff come from diverse backgrounds including Australia, Cuba, China, Nepal and the Philippines and have training in diverse medical systems which all have their own paradigm of health and teaching.

Not only is the teaching faculty diverse, the Trainees whom they teach also have similarly diverse backgrounds as even though they call themselves East Timorese, they may have been trained in Indonesia, Fiji or Cuba for their basic medical degree.

In what was a great challenge for the College, we promised to deliver the Surgical Teachers Course to this diverse faculty and make it culturally specific and relevant for Timor Leste. Coincidentally, and in contrast to this, the updated Surgical Teachers Course was delivered on the same two days in Hobart to Australian surgeons.

Alan Scott, Don Moss and Glenn Guest (the Dili faculty) took on the challenge of making the course culturally specific and relevant to Timor Leste and were assisted by Jenepher Martin and Stephen Tobin.

Jenepher Martin led the original development of the College's Surgical Teachers course and was a member of the foundation faculty for the new Surgical Teachers Course in Hobart, demonstrating her own versatility, flexibility and adaptability as a good educator.

At the same time as the Dili faculty were off to Timor Leste to deliver the course, David Birks, Trish Davidson, Meron Pitcher and Jenepher Martin were heading down south to Hobart to launch the new Surgical Teachers Course.

In delivering these courses, both groups of faculty crossed a relatively narrow body of water off mainland Australia to arrive at their destination and both had course dinners featuring seafood; however, this is where the similarity ended.

As one group enjoyed fresh seafood under the stars on the beach washed down with Tiger beer slapping away malaria and dengue mozzies, the other indulged in delicious food with the heater substituting for the warm tropical breeze.

In Dili, the course was delivered in English (albeit sometimes with a Scottish accent thanks to Alan Scott) to an enthusiastic audience, but the discussions often included a generous smattering of Tetun, Bahasa, Spanish and Portuguese. Despite this tower of Babel, the course was well received.

Clockwise: Faculty and participants of the 2012 Dili course; Joao Pedro, participating in the course; Eric Vreede with medical student.



To make this course relevant to Timor Leste, there were many adaptations made to the original Surgical Teachers Course. For instance one of the key teaching methods in the course is referred to as the 'snowball' principle. However 'snowball' is not a term that readily translates to a country that is continually bathed in tropical sunshine and hasn't seen snow since the last Ice Age!

Similarly, the sporting analogies involving golf and Aussie Rules football seemed unlikely to strike a chord in a nation where no golf courses exist and the round ball form of football is dominant. In Hobart no such difficulties were encountered and there was even a possibility that the snowball analogy could be demonstrated for real!

Fortunately, despite cultural and language barriers, the course provided appropriate examples across all medical specialties to highlight the principles of education which do cross the cultural divide of two diverse countries as Timor Leste and Australia.

Finally, the question should be asked: are we making a difference in surgical teacher education? These strikingly different venues underline the problem of evaluating what effects the Surgical Teachers Course has on one's teaching practice.

Both courses received overwhelming positive feedback. In Tasmania, the course was noted as a good learning opportunity

which provided a framework for teaching, feedback and skills training. In Dili, as a result the fledgling teaching, faculty now feel much better prepared to tackle the responsibility of delivering Timor Leste's first Diploma courses.

The real success of this course can only be measured over years and decades as the attendees use their new found skills to teach and influence the next generation of students and Trainees under their guidance.

But, in a very encouraging and early sign, Dr Joao called a meeting of all Trainees the week following the course and by all accounts applied every principle of teaching and feedback that had been delivered during the course.

It would be hard to find a better example of how a course such as this can influence behaviour. With the Diploma training program in the formative stages, this seems to have been delivered timely and effectively and will hopefully have an influence for many years to come.

Footnote: Many thanks to all the members of the faculty, the participants and the College's Dili staff who organised things so well. Special thanks to Eliza Muir for her behind the scenes work with this course while on her student elective!

Glenn Guest and Jenepher A. Martin

Registrations are now open for the *NEW* Surgical Teachers Course

Melbourne 11-13 April, 2013
Adelaide 29-31 August, 2013
Perth 24-26 October, 2013

To register please email PDactivities@surgeons.org