

Vicky Lavy shares experiences of the International Christian Medical and Dental Association



ICMDA: A WORLDWIDE FAMILY

key points

- ICMDA was founded in 1963 when doctors from 16 different countries gathered for a conference in Amsterdam. Today there are over 70 member organisations.
- ICMDA conferences and camps are often the catalysts for new national movements to start, and the encouragement that helps them grow.
- It's important for doctors in difficult circumstances to know that they are not alone.

To be honest, I was never very interested in ICMDA as a medical student and junior doctor – a shocking confession for the (now) Head of International Ministries. ICMDA is the umbrella body that links up Christian medical movements around the world. At CMF conferences we would hear news from places I had never heard of and which seemed to have little relevance to my life as a doctor in UK; there was always so much on offer at home that I never considered going to an international conference. But when my husband Chris and I went to live and work Malawi, suddenly ICMDA became very important to me.

A birth in the family

When we arrived in Malawi in 1996 there was no Christian medical group. The College of Medicine was just a few years old so the first home-grown doctors were starting their careers. Many of them were Christians and had plenty of Bible teaching at church, but nothing that helped them to apply their faith to medicine and the challenges they would face as doctors.

So we began meeting together with a handful of students in the anatomy lab each week – an unusual place for fellowship. In 1998 a few of us went to the ICMDA World Congress in Durban, South Africa, and were amazed by the experience of meeting hundreds of Christian doctors and students from all over the world. We were even more amazed

to meet some Malawians – it seemed that we had had to travel to another country in order to meet our neighbours. We were so encouraged that we decided to start a movement back home, and so the Christian Medical and Dental Fellowship of Malawi (CMDF) was born.

Our fledgling group grew, supported and encouraged by ICMDA. Four years later, six of us went to the next World Congress in Taiwan. Lo and behold we met some junior doctors from Zimbabwe and Zambia – this time we had travelled halfway around the world to meet our neighbours. This was the birth of a wonderful sense of family in the Southern Africa region, with students and juniors bussing across borders to go to camps and meetings.

This laid the foundation for us to host the ICMDA Regional Conference in 2004, when we were thrilled to welcome over 200 people from nine countries in the region. I was amazed to see what had grown out of our small beginnings in the anatomy lab. ICMDA conferences had provided the impetus to get us started in Malawi and then to reach out beyond our borders. CMDF Malawi continues to thrive today.

Growing up

For many of us who have grown up in UK, CMF's annual student conference has been a formative part of our growth as Christian doctors. I used to love being taught by doctors who had trodden the



The first World ICMDA Conference 1963

path before me and were still enthusiastic about medicine and still growing in their faith – it was possible! But students in some countries have no such role models; I recently met an Italian student who knew of only one Christian doctor in the entire country.

This is the reason why we run the International Medical Student Conference (IMSC) every year: to teach and build up students from countries where numbers are few and resources are lacking. Those who come are bowled over by joining with 400 others at our National Students' Conference – the largest number of Christian medics many have ever seen. 'I never would have thought it possible' said a student from Spain, where there is seldom more than one or two Christians in a medical school. Students return from the IMSC fired up to build fellowships in their home countries.

CMF has sent many summer teams to countries in Eastern Europe over the years, helping to run student camps. Alex Bunn, a member of the CMF student team, remembers going to one of first of these camps in Belarus in 1999. 'The church was small and parachurch organisations were treated with suspicion. The bus bringing students to the camp had its blinds drawn down for fear of prosecution and people were aware that there were secret policemen in some of the meetings. When we taught from the Bible, the students were amazed. Mostly from an Orthodox background, they had never heard the Bible read in modern-day language. It was like the Reformation all over again.' Life remains difficult for Christians in Belarus, but there is an active Christian medical group that has grown up over the years, which recently helped to organise the first ever ICMDA Congress for Eastern Europe.

A link formed between students in Oxford and Albania, with Albanians coming to the IMSC and several summer teams going to Albania. Chris Downing, a student staff worker in Oxford in 2002, has built on these friendships over the years and has recently gone to serve as a long-term missionary in Albania, where he will be working with national doctors.

Liz McClenaghan helped run the IMSC as a student intern in 2011. Later in the year she went to a national medical student conference in Ukraine; 'It was so exciting to see the students who'd been

on the IMSC now taking leading roles back home. We didn't go to lead or teach, but just to join in with what they were doing. Bernard Palmer's book *Cure for Life* had been translated into Russian just in time for the conference, so we were able to give one to every student.'

Seeds are sown, friendships are made, new groups are born and young ones grow up.

Family unity

Christian doctors from eight countries came together in 2012 for the first ever ICMDA conference in the Caucasus. The region has been an arena for political, religious, and cultural rivalries for centuries. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 there have been a number of border disputes leading to fighting and conflict and tensions remain today. Christians are not immune to conflict and at the conference a misunderstanding sparked a sharp disagreement between two national groups one evening. Difficult discussions followed during the next day. But at the evening prayer meeting there was a moving demonstration of reconciliation, when the leaders of the national movements knelt down together and asked for forgiveness. Others followed in a remarkable display of unity.

ICMDA isn't usually in the business of brokering peace between countries at war but on this occasion there was a deep significance in Christian doctors from these nations coming together as part of a worldwide family.

Encouraging brothers and sisters

ICMDA was founded in 1963 when doctors from 16 different countries gathered for a conference in Amsterdam; today there are over 70 member organisations. There are other movements and individuals who are connected with ICMDA but not yet members. Some of these are in countries where there are only a handful of Christian doctors, others are in places where a fellowship is just starting up. In some places it's not possible to form an association of Christian doctors because the state is hostile to Christianity. In Azerbaijan, it is dangerous for Christians to meet together. If more than three people or more than two Bibles are found at a meeting, there is risk of a fine or even arrest. Some groups are under surveillance; phone calls are monitored and emails may be intercepted. Christian doctors and students do meet, but they have to make sure they do so in a different home each time. If someone knocks on the door they will say, 'We are just having dinner together.'

It's so important for doctors in such difficult circumstances to know that they are not alone. If they manage to get to an ICMDA conference they meet brothers and sisters from many countries; they find that they have a worldwide family standing alongside them.

Vicky Lavy is CMF Head of International Ministries



2014 World Congress, Rotterdam

Every four years ICMDA holds a World Congress. The next one is in Rotterdam, 19-24 July 2014. Why not come and be part of it? Since it's just across the water in the Netherlands, we hope that many from UK will be there. If you can't come yourself, please consider making a donation to the bursary fund which will enable students from resource-poor countries to attend. The conference will light a flame in many hearts and will help the family to grow bigger and stronger.

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