

Opening Address of the IMIA President at MEDINFO 89, Beijing

Minister of Public Health, Dr. Chen Ming Zhang; Vice Mayor of Beijing, Mr. Lu Yu Cheng; Vice President of Chinese Academy of Science and Technology, Prof Wu Jieping; Mr. Ouyang Zhineng, Prof. Manning, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen;

It is both a great pleasure and an honor to speak on this memorable occasion -- the opening of the Sixth World Congress of Medical Informatics. Considering the long way that we have come to this day, the pleasure I feel is beyond the power of words to describe and this same feeling is probably shared by the members of Chinese Council for MEDINFO and Chinese Organizing Committee who welcome us. This is the day for which we have long waited, and the famous, good October weather of Beijing also seems to welcome us, too.

First, I would like to express my deep appreciation to the members of the Chinese Council for MEDINFO chaired by Prof. Wu Jieping and the Chinese Organizing Committee, chaired by Mr. Ouyang, the members of Scientific Program Committee, chaired by Prof. Manning, and the members of Proceedings Committee, chaired by Mr. Barber. I know their tasks were difficult and hard, but I am sure that their efforts will be rewarded by this excellent congress. I would like to mention the names of all those who devoted their personal efforts for this congress, however, the time this would take, does not allow me to do so. But the contribution you have given to the success of this congress is soon to become a part of the history of MEDINFO, and your efforts will not be forgotten.

I speak on behalf of the International Medical Informatics Association, abbreviated as IMIA, which sponsored this international congress together with the World Health Organization. Since many of you may not be familiar with our organization, I would like to spend a few moments giving you a brief history. IMIA was established in 1978 to fulfill the specific needs of introducing the application of information science and technology to the fields of health care and biomedical research. This field is now known as *Medical Informatics*, and in this endeavor, IMIA has promoted informatics research, international cooperation in the dissemination and exchange of information, and medical informatics education. Currently, IMIA has 33 national member countries and 16 corresponding members, that covers all the continents, east and west, north and south. It has 10 working groups that are highly active in specialized fields, and IMIA usually sponsors two or three specialized conferences periodically. For example, the most recent conference was held in Canada, and dealt with medical informatics education.

IMIA also organizes a general conference named MEDINFO every third year, and this particular congress is the sixth of this series. For your information, the first MEDINFO conference was held in Stockholm in 1974, succeeded by Toronto, Tokyo and Amsterdam, with the last MEDINFO conference prior to Beijing held in Washington, D.C. in 1986.

Although all previous MEDINFOS were a great success, each in their own way, I look with special pleasure to this MEDINFO in Beijing, since it show the world that medical informatics is now an essential part of medicine, regardless of differences in health care structure, geographical location or the stage of country development. This present MEDINFO has selected as its Theme '*Informatics in support of Global Health*'. This is to emphasize the above concept. Further, if I may say, I have a personal attachment to this Beijing MEDINFO. When I was elected as the president of IMIA, as an Asian, I wanted to hold the 1989 MEDINFO in some Asian country.

In 1984, I had the opportunity of visiting Beijing on the way to the Science and Technology University in Hefei, Anfi Province. While I was in Beijing, I was given a

chance to talk to scientists interested in information technologies in health. At the end of my talk, I introduced these scientists to IMIA and suggested that China think of hosting the 1989 MEDINFO. Although I knew of the great stride in modernization that China and Chinese people were making, I did not think that such a meeting could become reality. At that time, I looked upon my suggestions as a kind of dream. I do not know if Mr. Ouyang was among those present in my audience then, but it came as a great surprise at the IMIA Annual General Meetings in 1985, when I saw the proposal from China to host the 1989 MEDINFO. The proposal was welcomed and unanimously approved. Since then, as president of IMIA, and also as the person who first dreamed of this China MEDINFO, I have tried my best to support this congress. During the period of preparation, I have made friends with many talented young Chinese scientists and it has been most pleasant to work with them.

But the road to progress is not always only smooth. There can be rough patches in the road too and the incident in June in Beijing dealt a severe shock to this MEDINFO. I am certain that our organizing committee must have suffered because of it. So did IMIA. I should say that these past few months have been the most critical in the history of IMIA, and at times I really wondered if IMIA as an organization would survive. But I am very glad that the wisdom of our Chinese OC members has prevailed, and that the difficulties we have faced have been almost overcome.

At the end of June, IMIA decided to split MEDINFO into two parts and by the request of IMIA, part two of this meeting will be held in Singapore in December. The chairman of the Singapore Organizing Committee, Dr. K.C. Lun, is with us today. While this decision may not be looked upon favorably by some Chinese colleagues who worked so hard for this congress, as IMIA president, I feel it my duty to explain why IMIA has made such a decision.

After the incident in June, I contacted Mr Ouyang to see if it was still possible to have MEDINFO in Beijing and soon received many letters from members of the Chinese Organizing Committee, saying that there would be no problem in having MEDINFO in Beijing. I was deeply moved by their eagerness, and it was obvious that the devotion of our Chinese colleagues who worked so hard to get MEDINFO to Beijing would not be rewarded, if IMIA were to move MEDINFO to some other city. Moreover, many Chinese scientists have long waited for this scientific event.

At the same time, however, I received many letters from IMIA representatives and from the authors of some papers to be presented, indicating that they could not come to MEDINFO, if it were to be held in Beijing. This presented a serious dilemma. If very few people came to this scientific meeting, the objectives of MEDINFO could not be achieved.

Thus, to solve this dilemma, the key issue has been to respect the free will of each individual scientist, who wants to come to MEDINFO. Each scientist may have enough reasons for his or her decision. I, as well as most of the board members thought that IMIA must provide an opportunity for all of our colleagues to be heard, namely, those who can only come to the Beijing MEDINFO and to those who, because of their connections, cannot. This was the reason why IMIA decided to hold MEDINFO in two parts, this year.

I cordially thank the Chinese Organizing Committee, which understand the situation and has accepted this solution. Although the sites of MEDINFO has been split, the fact of MEDINFO remains a unity and the proceedings, which include papers presented both in Beijing and Singapore is the symbol of this unity. I hope that some of you can come to Singapore MEDINFO as well. I can give you one very practical information. That is; since you are registered here, you have only to pay additional fee of 150 US Dollars.

The days ahead are bound to be memorable for us. I hope that you will find this congress not only fruitful but also pleasant. Thank you

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President, IMIA