

NO-ONE packed a suit. Or tie. The dress code for the Surfers Medical Association of Australia's (SMAA) 16th Surf Symposium in the Maldives is strictly casual, as is the mood.

Inside the conference room, on the doorstep of Chaaya Island Dhonveli's exclusive Pasta Point surf break, doctors, specialists and allied health workers, exhausted from the surf, sink into chairs and sprawl on lounges, their board shorts dripping on to their bare feet.

The first speaker of the day taps on a computer screen and turns to admire the opening slide of his PowerPoint presentation: a surfer engulfed by a wave. Associate Professor Michael Baigent, an addiction specialist, prefers to think of surfing as a "healthy obsession".

Michael is the SMAA's first speaker, and his relaxed delivery sets the tone for the remaining lectures. It is Michael's second time at the conference, but his first as a presenter.

"My love of surfing brought me here, but there were so many other aspects to the conference that intrigued me: getting back to grassroots general medicine, mixing with doctors outside of your specialty, and particularly the altruistic work," he says.

The SMAA's tagline is "Exchanging knowledge and experience. Providing aid to those in need". As part of its charter, the association delivers educational sessions to medical staff at hospitals in the republic's capital, Male; it offers advice to government departments; raises funds for people in need, and runs clinics at community healthcare centres.

In conjunction with Professor Patrick

McGorry, one of the SMAA's surfing psychiatrists, the association assisted the Maldivian health ministry to develop a national mental health policy following the 2004 tsunami.

Last year, a team of SMAA members installed automatic defibrillators across a number of islands, training the local health workers in their use and maintenance.

"The doctors who attend our conferences aren't solely focused on making money," says Dr Simon Leslie, the SMAA's founder and president.

"They understand that what's good for them is exercise, friendship, community and giving back to the people whose environment they enjoy."

Harry Gatt agrees. An intensive care paramedic with the Ambulance Service of NSW, Harry is the SMAA's secretary. The 52-year-old holds the record for most time spent in the surf in one day – nine hours – but is quick to dispel the notion that the conference is for surfers only.

"There's a limit to how many surfers the tour company will allow on the island's exclusive breaks, so out of the 50 or so conference attendees, only 30 will surf."

This season is unseasonably wet, but it's humid, and the sea is warm and swarming with tropical fish, so, in between lectures, the non-surfers in the group head into the lagoon with masks and fins to swim among the reef sharks, butterfly fish and manta rays.

There's plenty to do on Chaaya Island. Laps in the freshwater pool, nightly crab races, a dolphin safari, sunset fishing and scuba diving are on offer, but when lectures have wrapped and the swell is small, most of the SMAA members wander onto the balcony overlooking the surf break.

They sit in groups on plastic chairs looking out across the ocean and talk about the swell, but they also talk about their families, politics, the medical fraternity, thorny patients, the Medicare system, and the challenges, difficulties and rewards that confront them as members of the healing profession.

"A lot of conferencing and networking goes on, in and out of the water," Harry says. "Ideas are exchanged and lifelong friendships are formed."

Dr Matt Davis, a 39-year-old specialist emergency physician from the NSW central coast, has been to the Maldives six times since his first conference in 2000. He has trained the island's surf guides and boat crew in CPR and plans to do a refresher course for the guides – and doctors – later in the week.

"Surfing relaxes me mentally. Normally by 2 o'clock in the afternoon I'm ready to go to sleep."

"It's a lot less formal than other conferences," he says, swatting away a dragonfly. "You can get hold of the speakers and have a chat to them any time you like."

Dr Patrick Liston, an intensivist, anaesthetist and Australian Army reservist, who recently returned from six weeks with a surgical team in Afghanistan, also likes the small group setting.

"It's interactive. In a big auditorium, when you have 1000 people all wanting to ask the speaker a question, you don't get to interact with the brains trust," he says.

Patrick also appreciates the SMAA's multifocused approach: "As a specialist, I've become better and better at less and less, and I don't often see the multiple ways of treating a complex disease."

"A general medical conference is good for keeping your feet on the ground and learning to care for the whole patient."

He also sees the conference as a chance to practise what he preaches – work-life balance and the importance of exercise.

Had the SMAA's 16th conference been a purely academic program, Matt probably wouldn't have signed up. He sees the mix of academia and exercise as fundamental to the conference's success.

"For me, if I'm not physically stimulated, I actually get more tired. Whether it's surfing or skiing, I'm much more on the ball, having just done some exercise."

Dr Bruce Coppa, a GP who practises in Milingimbi, a tiny island off Arnhem Land, agrees.

"Surfing relaxes me mentally. Normally by two o'clock in the afternoon I'm ready to go to sleep," the 58-year-old smiles, "but when I went to the first session yesterday, I was surprised by how well I was able to concentrate."

With the day's lectures concluded, the delegates head back to the water. Even in the cooler months, the water temperature in the Maldives rarely dips below 27° C, so there is little need for a wetsuit.

A messy wave upends Michael's board, and the smooth, hard polymer smacks the bridge of the psychiatrist's nose. He's sent from the water with a ribbing that his blood will attract the sharks, but he's paddling back out soon after, his wound cleaned and dressed by fellow speaker, Dr John Crock, a Melbourne-based plastic



Not your standard medical conference: a group of doctors combines surfing, volunteer work and professional networking in the Maldives. *Suzy Zail* was there.



and reconstructive surgeon.

John surfed competitively through medical school. His practice only allows time for the occasional surf now, so his regular attendance in the Maldives and Fiji, where he lectures local doctors on hand and wrist surgery, afford him a little more time on the water.

“Because there’s so much construction in Male, there’s a huge number of industrial hand injuries,” John says.

“I could’ve done two or three surgeries over here,” he shrugs, “but that won’t help. These surgeons need training.”

John has spent three nights in Male airing a six-hour presentation he has compiled, showcasing lectures from the world’s top hand surgeons.

“They devoured the movie. These surgeons here are skilled; it’s just that no-one has ever invested the time to train them.”

It is dark by 6 pm, and the doctors, some with partners and children in tow, sit in groups under the thatched roof of an open air restaurant. They come in sarongs and singlet tops, and heap lashings of fish curry, papadums, red rice and snake gourd onto their plates. There is lasagna and fish and chips for the children, and mango mousse and platters of fresh papaya for dessert.

By 9 pm, sunburnt and tired, they say their good-nights and wander down the island’s hand-swept sandy paths to their beach bungalows.

It’s thundering the next morning when a group of diehard surfers leap onto their boards. Lightning pierces the sky as they ride their last wave in to shore, before the sea and sky conspire to expel them.

Today’s lecture program includes: Ten Years’ Experience with an AFL Team, Fetal

Programming of Disease, and Addictive Internet Pornography.

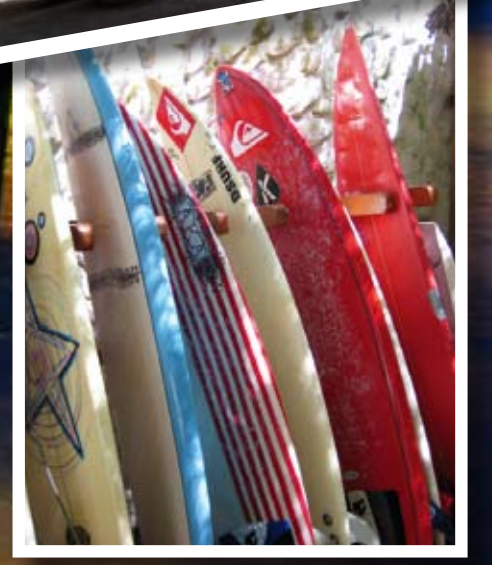
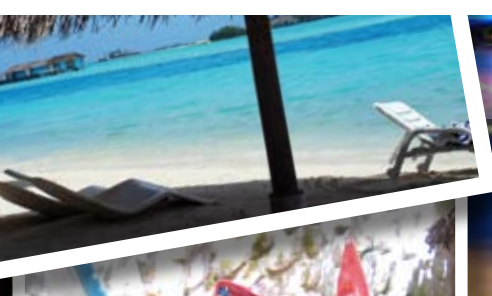
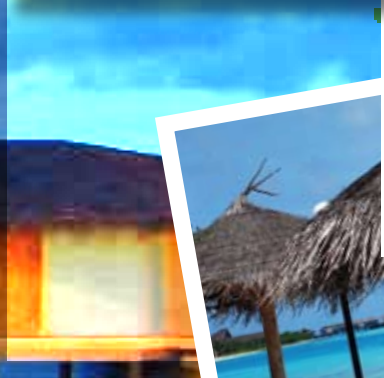
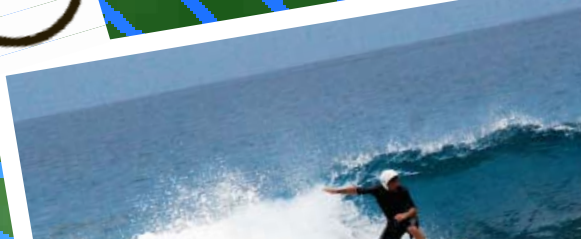
In the afternoon, Michael Bruce will visit one of the nearby islands to check out the stack of medical journals he has collected from Adelaide; Bruce will attend to the resort’s bar staff who has sore ankles, and a bunch of doctors will sail to Male to meet with the CEO of the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital.

The rain continues unabated. Black butterflies shelter under palm fronds, and the sandy path that winds between the bungalows is sodden. Harry is apologetic about the weather, but still upbeat. The lectures have been well attended, the surf is big, and the republic’s president has shown interest in meeting with a group of SMAA representatives to discuss how they can further contribute to his republic’s health-care system.

Harry looks at the zinc-creamed faces of the men and women waxing their boards outside the conference room. “We have doctors who help in the villages and others who help at the hospital. I’ve become a better person over the years, being in touch with these guys. Their goodness rubs off on you,” he smiles, before picking up his surfboard and stepping into the sea.

QUICK LINKS

- For more information on Chaaya Island, visit www.chaayahotels.com
- To enquire about the SMAA’s next conference, contact Harry Gatt at maldivesmedicalconference@msn.com



From top: the writer’s husband, Dr Shaun Zail, surfs past Pasta Point; scuba diving offers a diversion; Dr Zail and GP Dr Bruce Coppa; SMAA secretary Harry Gatt and other delegates travel to a nearby surf break; the lagoon at Chaaya Island; doctors’ surfboards stand waiting while they attend lectures. Main pic: Over-the-water bungalows at the resort.