

Gastro Fellows Weekend 2025

4-6TH April

Lord Charles Hotel, Somerset West

This year's Fellows' Weekend took us to The Lord Charles Hotel nestled in the heart of the Helderberg in Somerset West. With its old-world charm, spacious grounds, and panoramic views of both mountains and vineyards, it provided the perfect setting for a weekend of learning, laughter, and connection.

For the three of us – surgical fellows knee-deep in our final year, juggling call, cut, and conference prep – it was a breath of fresh air to step away from the hospital and immerse ourselves in an event that managed to be both academically enriching and genuinely enjoyable.

Friday opened with a warm welcome from Professor Jonas, who set the tone for what would be a weekend filled with practical insight and thoughtful reflection. Sessions quickly split along interest lines, with the surgical fellows joining parallel discussions on advanced HPB cases, ampullary tumours, primary sclerosing cholangitis, and colorectal liver metastasis.

It wasn't just lectures, it was conversations as faculty members walked us through grey-zone cases, dissected controversies with clarity, and made space for fellows to speak up, ask, challenge, and sometimes laugh at our own assumptions. A session on neuroendocrine tumours sparked a fascinating discussion on surgical timing, diagnostic nuance, and evolving treatment algorithms — the kind of session that left us taking notes long after the slides had ended.

As night fell, the buzz shifted from medical facts to fun facts — the much-anticipated quiz night did not disappoint. This year's hosts Professors Boutall and Levin infused fresh energy into the trivia, with questions ranging from obscure GI conditions to pop culture curveballs. Case in point: "Who is currently the most streamed artist on Spotify?" Most importantly, however, history was made — the HPB surgeons finally dethroned the reigning champions, the colorectal fellows, in a dramatic quiz upset, despite rampant cheating allegations and some very suspicious last-minute answer changes. Victory, at last, was sweet.

Saturday started either with a jog through the tree-lined streets surrounding the hotel or a very civilised breakfast spread — both perfect ways to warm up for another full day. The academic programme leaned into case-based learning, with interactive discussions that made us reflect not just on "what to do" but also "why we do it."

A personal highlight for us came on day two, during the dedicated HPB group sessions. In a smaller, more focused setting, we had the opportunity for truly intimate and in-depth conversations with our mentors. These sessions moved beyond didactics — they

became platforms for mentorship, reflection, and even the occasional career pep talk. It was a rare space to ask tough questions and get honest, unfiltered answers from surgeons we deeply admire.

Sunday brought a perfect balance of insight and entertainment. The day's sessions kicked off with a rapid-fire endoscopy quiz by Professor Chinnery, but it was the later talks — where senior consultants were gently put on the spot — that had the room buzzing. Equal parts engaging, enlightening, and just a little tongue-in-cheek, these moments allowed us to see a lighter side of our mentors while still absorbing pearls of clinical wisdom. It's not every day you watch your professors tackle live diagnostic challenges and banter about them.

As we packed up and said our goodbyes (some of us still arguing over quiz answers), we felt immensely grateful. To the Gastro Foundation and especially Bini Seale for organizing another exceptional weekend. To the industry without whom this weekend would not have been possible. To our mentors for showing up, teaching, listening. And to each other — for making this community one we're proud to be part of.

Here's to sharp minds, steady hands, and wherever next year's weekend may take us.

Malini Bhana, Brian Misoi, Pacific Apai

HPB Fellows

University of Cape Town