

*if the surfeit of delicacies,  
or the wine of my country dared to disturb my health  
or equilibrium of my poetry,  
from you,  
dark monarch,  
giver of syrups and of poisons  
regulator of salts,  
from you I hope for justice:  
I love Life: Do not betray me! Work on! Do not arrest my song.*

Chilean Nobel Laureate; Pablo Neruda 'Ode to the Liver'

The Gastroenterology Foundation certainly paid homage to the ills of betrayed livers by focusing on Alcoholic and Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease at the annual Liver Interest group meeting at the Crystal Towers Hotel at the beginning of December 2015.

Interestingly the Liver transplant team at Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre is in the process of presenting its 10year audit data. I was able to present some of it at the South African Transplant Society conference in October this year. Alcoholic Steatohepatitis and Non Alcoholic Fatty Liver disease were the second and third most common cause of liver transplantation at our centre, underlining the importance of this meetings focus.

We were fortunate enough to have the meeting attended by Professor Gyongyi Szabo, President of the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) and Professor & Vice Chair for Research at the Department of Medicine of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, USA. Additionally we played host to colleagues from the rest of the continent who added much needed local perspectives. Their presence also alluded to the Gastroenterology Foundations future endeavours taking the Foundation from a local to a continental organisation educating gastroenterologists through sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr. Chris Kassianides opened the meeting with updates from the recent AASLD meeting held in November in San Francisco, leaving me with the question of whether we could see the eradication of Hepatitis C in the not too distant future considering the ever increasing armamentarium along with the ever decreasing complexity of treatment making these drugs more available to those that need it.

Dr. Corné Kruger asked why is NAFLD less prevalent in the South African Black population and used some of his research to postulate different epigenetic mechanisms that may be at play.

Prof Olufunmileyo Lesi then dropped the "N" and discussed alcohol related liver disease. The different types of alcohol consumed in different societies varies considerably along with the alcohol content of traditional brews. Palm Wine popular in West Africa can have an ethanol content of 37% which puts it well into the same weight category as heavy hitters such as vodka! Additionally cofactors such as southern Africa's high hepatitis B prevalence and potential high iron and aflatoxin ingestion may contribute to the burden of disease.

Prof Szabo gave a fascinating basic science lecture on the Gut-Liver Axis in alcoholic liver disease. Prof Szabo showed how intestinal integrity was compromised with heavy ethanol use leading to bacterial translocation and inflammation triggered by Pathogen Associated Molecular Patterns (PAMPs) which are part of the innate immune system triggering an inflammatory response. Additionally alcohol can lead to bacterial dysbiosis resulting in a pro-inflammatory gut microbiome.

Prof Wendy Spearman focused our attention on the growing problem of childhood obesity and with it, the problem of paediatric NAFLD. Management of the threat of NAFLD is surely where the hepatologists' focus needs to be considering the massive advances in the treatment of Hepatitis C.

A wonderful brunch was then served allowing for old friends from around the country to catch up. Refueled and with additional cups of coffee in hand: the delegates re-entered the hall for Prof Szabo to discuss the STOPAH trial. The STOPAH trial was published in the NEJM in April 2015 and examined the benefit of prednisone or pentoxifylline in the management of Alcoholic hepatitis. Neither had clear long term benefit but prednisone was associated with a better 28day survival. The discussion then led to what else we could do to improve outcomes. Abstinence is the best long term management option but a focus on addressing the nutritional aspects of alcohol abuse should also be paid attention to. Micronutrients such as zinc and magnesium are often depleted along with a degree of protein energy malnutrition. Future trials targeting uric acid show promise using age-old drugs Probenecid and Allopurinol. Anakinra - an IL-1 receptor antagonist is also being considered as a treatment option to down regulate the inflammatory process in the alcohol affected liver.

The meeting closed with an interesting round table discussion on viral hepatitis with cases from Johannesburg and Cape Town being presented to the audience who were encouraged to give their opinions on the management.

Once again, a highly successful event hosted by the Gastroenterology Foundation with an excellent turn out. It certainly was a coup to attract such a prominent speaker fresh from the AASLD conference. The bar has been raised for next year!

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