

Gastroenterology Foundation G-ECHO



Since the start of the COVID pandemic in March 2020, all the Gastro Foundation teaching programs pivoted to a virtual platform. The year ended apprehensively with the decision to host two face to face meetings - a liver interest group meeting at the end of November 2020 in Johannesburg and an IBD interest group meeting in the first week of December in Cape Town. These meetings were successful and were good examples of what medical meetings in the COVID era might encompass - a small face to face meeting (less than 30 people) with a large (up to 100) virtual audience and recorded talks from international speakers (to prevent any IT glitches) followed by live Q and A with the speaker live-streamed from the host country. In addition, selected faculty on the virtual platform are available to add expert opinions and comments.

The virtual platform incorporated the ECHO project and has expanded enormously following the outbreak of the COVID pandemic with over a million attendees world- wide. This began with a monthly viral hepatitis ECHO meeting which continues, and which has expanded into a G-ECHO - GI Hepatology ECHO weekly meetings alternating endoscopy, IBD, patient blood management (PBM) and liver cancer screening and treatment. An additional meeting on the pathology of the liver skillfully presented by Professor Martin Hale from Wits University has been added with an enthusiastic following illustrating the dire need for pathology training in sub Saharan Africa (SSA). The G-ECHO pathology program will be extended to include luminal GI pathology. Depending on the response these weekly alternating G-ECHO subspecialty meetings may become weekly or bi-weekly meetings.

We are committed to working with AUDA–NEPAD, the development agency of the African Union, on important issues such as the compulsory roll out of the birth dose HBV vaccine for all neonates born in SSA and the treatment of maternal and infant iron deficiency anaemia using enteral and parenteral Iron replacement therapy. Replacing blood with iron is an important therapeutic paradigm shift with pharmaco-economic advantages and with better and improved outcomes. This will allow our sister organization GHASSA (Gastroenterology and Hepatology Association of SSA) to get off the ground and become the truly great networking organization that it is designated to be. There is a great and urgent need for a centralized SSA organization to coordinate all the GI Hepatology activities that are currently hosted in SSA and I am hoping that GHASSA will fulfill this need.

The COVID pandemic has derailed many of our endeavors but as with all pandemics once the catastrophe has subsided the ensuing product is a better and more refined one. We recall the devastating black death of 1348 in Sienna, Italy which lasted seven years and wiped out over half of Sienna's population only to give rise to the Italian Renaissance – one of the most exceptional eras of artistic, cultural and economic rebirths the world has ever experienced. I look forward to the Foundation's Renaissance in years to come.

Chris Kassianides

Chairman, Gastroenterology Foundation of sub Saharan Africa

