

LIVER INTEREST GROUP MEETING_2nd DECEMBER 2023

The Gastroenterology Foundation of Sub-Saharan Africa, once again brought together medical professionals with special interest and enthusiasm in liver diseases at the posh Vineyard Hotel located in the beautiful city of Cape Town, South Africa. The update meeting comes annually towards the end of the year and usually serves as an apotheosis in new developments in the diagnostic, treatment, research and advocacy for liver diseases. It also serves as a plenary session for the liver-related meetings and conferences that will be coming the following year. The meeting was held both in person and virtually, to cater for colleagues from all over SSA.

The theme for this year's update meeting was "Viral Hepatitis and Hepatocellular Carcinoma in Sub-Saharan Africa; Breaking cycles of Infection" and the faculty selected was a panel of well experienced experts in the medical field.

The start for the day was the seamless registration with welcome refreshments organized by Bini Seale and her team through Cornucopia Communications.

Professor Chris Kassianides in his element, eloquently gave the welcoming and opening remarks. He as usual without fail, gave a brief over-view about the Gastroenterology Foundation of Sub-Saharan Africa, the different activities the foundation has and is doing, the success stories, publications and previous meetings the foundation hosted. He talked about the G-ECHO platforms for Fellows in training, the Fellows' weekends, the GIEQS platform that has been made free for Fellows in training to learn endoscopy and the point of care ultrasound (POCUS) teaching. He touched on the recent DDW meeting that Professor Setshedi attended and indeed gave a special mention that, it was a great representation especially that Professor Setshedi has been invited in next year's DDW to give a talk. He continued to give lots of publicity about the 1st African Viral Hepatitis Convention which will be held in conjunction with IHPBA next year in May 2024 in Cape Town.

The newly appointed Full Professor, Prof Mark Sonderup expertly gave an overview of the risks of mother to child transmission of viral hepatitis in pregnancy. He talked about transmission during pregnancy (transplacental infection), at delivery (maternal vaginal secretions) and after delivery (breast feeding and contact with maternal saliva). He gave insight that, this is much so in Asia where the prevalence of Hepatitis B is also as high as in Sub-Saharan Africa with more prevalent genotypes being B and C. He emphasized that Child-to-Child transmission in Sub-Saharan Africa remains the dominant mode of transmission. His talk was followed by the well ~~re-known~~ renowned leader in the field of Hepatology who is currently, the Head of Division of Hepatology at Groote Schuur Hospital and University of Cape Town, Professor Wendy Spearman. Wendy, as she is affectionately called by her close peers and colleagues talked about "Prevention of mother-to-child transmission of viral hepatitis". She rubber-stamped some of the points that Prof Sonderup talked about, like the fact that child-to-child in Sub-Saharan Africa remains the main mode of transmission. She gave reference to the exemplary work in Taiwan where there is a conscious and determined decision to curb Hepatitis B. She is a strong advocate for universal vaccination of all babies for viral hepatitis B. The need for point of care screening and DNA testing was over-emphasized by Professor Spearman and she also gave insight on Hepatitis C viral and treatment during pregnancy. Professor Emerita Anna Kramvis enthusiastically talked about the clinical implications of Hepatitis B virus genotypes and HBeAg in paediatrics. She talked about HBeAg's functions, as an immunoregulatory protein (immunogen, tolerogen, etc) and its role as an oncoprotein. She said, one may think of the HBeAg as 'early Antigen', "extracellular Antigen" or "Enigmatic Antigen" but really it was named after the order in which it was discovered. Just before the tasty "brunch", Dr Penny Rose, the head of Paediatric Gastroenterology at Tygerberg Hospital talked about the management of Hepatitis B in children and shared three

challenging case reports that they managed in her place of practice. The brunch time, either than the fact that the food was splendid, was very important in that, colleagues had moments to chat, catch up, make new contacts, share ideas, juniors meeting mentors and potential for future collaborations were made. This was time to brainstorm and reflect on what was just presented and to also unwind and look forward to upcoming remaining talks. It served as a beautiful health break.

The next session chaired by Professor Marc Bernon and Dr Rene Krause was an equally explosive part of the programme. The Surgeons in Hepatobiliary were a marvel. Dr Sanju Sobnach, a transplant and hepatobiliary surgeon (with previous work experience in Canada) set the tone by passionately taking us through treatment options for hepatocellular carcinoma and outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa. He talked about the treatment options being ablation, resection, transplant, TACE and systematic treatment. He shared HCC management from the largest single centre database in Sub-Saharan Africa (UCT/GSH) where more than 80% of patients were referred for palliative care. His strong take and food for thought was that colleagues must entertain resecting large HCC's, using TACE, TARE, TAE, Transarterial RFA/MCWA as bridge to definitive therapy and use local data and international data with similar disease profile for making decisions on liver transplantation. The Head of Hepatobiliary at Groote Schuur Hospital and the IHPBA 2024 Congress Chairman, Prof Ed Jonas talked about Hepatocellular Carcinoma in pregnancy. He left everyone with the reality that Hepatocellular carcinoma is "the one tumour that's kills two people at once" and he concluded by saying advocacy is the main reason why we are talking about hepatocellular carcinoma in pregnancy. Dr Rene Krause a family medicine physician and a palliative care teacher and expert, talked about palliative care in liver cancer and its role in primary hepatocellular carcinoma prevention. She emphasized that palliative care is not just "morphine and pain relieve", there is much more to it, whatever palliative intervention is planned for the patient, cost to the patient and family must be considered and that it takes a multi-disciplinary team to carry out palliative care.

The climax of the day was a talk on the lessons learnt from HIV advocacy, by the invited speaker Prof Mark Heywood an Oxford graduate who is a human rights and social justice activist. Prof Heywood was giving insight on his works on HIV activism which spans over 25 years and how we can benchmark and tap on his HIV advocacy experiences. He gave a very promising picture about curbing viral hepatitis, looking at how it was difficult to deal with HIV/AIDS over 25 years back especially with stigma and low resources then. He said the good and promising news for us, is that there is expertise, there are resources and there is a trail that we can follow unlike during the early HIV era where there was nothing. He talked about community outreaches, need to educate and include the media for advocacy, and importantly to engage the government. His last words were "There is no reason why we should not be able to succeed" in our quest to eliminate viral hepatitis.

The meeting was a great Success and many thanks to Ampath laboratories, Equity Pharmaceuticals, GILEAD and Lancet Laboratories who are always in close and full support of the Liver Update Meetings.

We look forward to beautiful up-coming holidays and Liver meetings in the coming year most importantly the 1ST AFRICAN VIRAL HEPATITIS CONVENTION hosted by GHASSA under the auspices of the Gastroenterology Foundation of Sub-Saharan Africa in conjunction with the IHPBA meeting to be held in Cape Town, South Africa from 14th -18th May 2024.

BY

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