

11th Annual Liver Interest Group Meeting 2020

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The annual liver interest meeting sponsored by the Gastro Foundation of SSA was held at the Radisson Blu Gautrain Hotel and Conference Centre on 28 November 2020. It was an unexpectedly cold and miserable morning, almost resembling a typical autumn day in the UK. As the few delegates started to trickle in, there was an unstated ambiance which mirrored not only the weather, but the weight of the ongoing global pandemic.

After the accustomed screening and a COVID-friendly meet-and-greet, the meeting began. The title of this year's meeting was MAFLD: The Metabolic Syndrome. An apt theme for a fast-evolving topic within the field of Hepatology globally. An energetic and eloquent Professor Chris Kassianides, Chairman of the Gastroenterology Foundation of Sub-Saharan Africa, offered a warm welcome to delegates and set the tone for what would be a successful Saturday morning meeting. Professor Wendy Spearman, via Zoom streamed from the University of Cape Town (UCT), gave an informative update on Project-ECHO, the tele-mentoring program which has seen tremendous growth, and in the South African context, has not only had proven success in HIV and TB but now increasingly is having an impact in the screening and treatment of chronic viral hepatitis B and C. The recently launched GECHO (GI-ECHO) an extension of this initiative has also been well received and is now becoming an important tool in the sharing of knowledge notably in South Africa, but also in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and abroad.

Next up hepatologist, Professor Jacob George presented from the Westmead Institute in Sydney, Australia and introduced the delegates to the concept of MAFLD - metabolic dysfunction associated fatty liver disease. He showed us how this new definition and diagnostic criteria better describes the pathogenesis of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and how it can further improve clinical practice and allow for uniformity when conducting clinical trials. He was followed by Professor Mark Sonderup (UCT), who described the disease profile within the SSA context and what the way forward might be on the continent.

Dr Evan Shoul, Infectious Diseases Specialist at University of Witwatersrand (Wits) then gave a very topical update on COVID19 and touched on some important considerations with regards to the metabolic syndrome. The first session was concluded by Dr Bilal Bobat - transplant hepatologist at Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre (WDGMC) who gave an engaging talk entitled “peculiarities of the decompensated NASH cirrhotic.” He outlined the disease-associated concerns as well as reasons why such patients less well as compared to patients who are decompensated cirrhotics without the metabolic comorbidities.

After a quick brunch, the second session delved in deeper into the management of MAFLD. First up, Professor Jeff Wing of Wits School of Clinical Medicine who gave us the Endocrinologist’s perspective. New therapies for the treatment of Type-2 Diabetes Mellitus as well as therapies directed at NAFLD/MAFLD directly are evolving. Dr Gary Fetter, an experienced bariatric surgeon in private practice, then shared his experience in bariatric surgery and its utility and cost-effectiveness in patients with obesity and further-more MAFLD.

Another internationally acclaimed speaker, Professor Elisabetta Bugianesi, medical gastroenterologist and researcher from Torino, Italy connected virtually to give an approach to the medical management of NAFLD and key updates of the EASL guidelines.

As the weather heated up outside so did the socially-distant conference room with the session coming to a very exciting close as Dr Francisca van der Schyff, transplant surgeon at WDGMC, presented a talk on liver transplantation in the setting of MAFLD and stimulated a vibrant discussion around bariatric procedures at the time of transplant surgery.

After the break, we were treated to yet another international speaker - Debbie Shawcross, Professor of Hepatology and Chronic Liver Failure from Kings College London. She presented a superb talk that enhanced our knowledge of hepatic encephalopathy and the interplay between hepatic inflammation and the gut microbiome with regards to the pathogenesis, as well as data regarding novel therapies in the pipeline.

Dr Omondi Ogude, medical oncologist in private practice, gave us an update on the medical management of hepatocellular carcinoma and some of the newer treatments that are emerging. These essentially include the data emerging on the survival benefits of combination therapies of bevacizumab plus

atezolizumab for inoperable HCC. These, together with other immune checkpoint inhibitors, are showing survival benefits when compared to what remains as standard of care viz. oral sorafenib. The challenge of patients in sub-Saharan Africa accessing these therapies remains.

The day concluded with an academic debate - Sharan Rambarran (a transplant surgeon), Dinen Parbhoo (Medical gastroenterologist/hepatologist) and me (GI and hepatology fellow) all working at WDGMC, battled it out to see who would get the liver to transplant! The choice was between a patient with alcoholic associated hepatitis who recently stopped drinking; a patient with MASH with a BMI greater than 38; and a patient with HCC who was beyond Milan Criteria respectively. This was a nerve wracking experience but also a terrific way to end off a very educational day and a great learning experience.

Thanks to the sponsors: Equity, Cipla, Ferring and Gilead, for generously supporting this meeting, especially under these most difficult circumstances.

Finally, special thanks to the Gastro Foundation Faculty for its ongoing commitment to the continuous medical education of gastroenterologists and hepatologists in all stages of their development.