



World Digestive Health Day 2010



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Doctors need to be aware of inflammatory bowel disease and diagnose early

Every year on 29 May, the World Gastroenterology Organisation (WGO) celebrates World Digestive Health Day. One of its main purposes is to educate healthcare professionals about various digestive diseases to help them optimise diagnosis and maximise care. This year, the spotlight falls on inflammatory bowel disease, which embraces conditions such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease.

This is the third consecutive year in which South Africa has participated in this worldwide initiative. In South Africa, World Digestive Health Day takes place under the auspices of the South African Gastroenterology Society (SAGES), the local subsidiary of the WGO.

According to Professor Reid Ally, president of SAGES, the WGO has placed a lot of emphasis in recent years on standardising gastroenterological care around the world, but especially in developing countries. "There were big gaps in respect of what was taught and consequently practised," he says. "The Africa Institute of Digestive Diseases (AIDD) at Chris Hani Baragwanath was the first of what is now a network of 14 training centres throughout the developing world."

Patients with inflammatory bowel disease usually present to general practitioners first and because of this it is critical that GPs have a high index of suspicion when confronted with the relevant symptoms. "Very often doctors at primary care level misinterpret the symptoms and treat patients inappropriately," says Professor Ally. "Inflammatory bowel disease is a rarer, but much more serious condition, than irritable bowel syndrome, which was the focus of last year's World Digestive Health Day. Its consequences in respect of morbidity and mortality are therefore much greater. It is also associated with the development of colorectal cancer, so it's of paramount importance that doctors diagnose it correctly and treat it early."

It is therefore crucial for GPs to educate themselves about the disease so that they can diagnose promptly and triage patients to specialist care. "Far too often, GPs wait some time before referring patients on. I can't underscore enough the importance of not delaying the process," observes Professor Ally.

The primary symptom of inflammatory bowel disease is

diarrhoea, characterised by bloody stools. The blood is indicative of inflammation in the large and/or small bowel. "Patients will also present with searing abdominal pain as well as tenismus (pain on defecation)," says Professor Ally. "In addition, there may be unexplained weight loss, anaemia as a result of the loss of blood in the stool, and some liver dysfunction. When inflammatory bowel disease is suspected, patients need to be referred for endoscopy to confirm the diagnosis."

Inflammatory bowel disease is an immune-mediated condition and doctors at the coalface need to be aware that significant advances have been made in the treatment thereof. "In the old days, we simply used to blunt the total immune response with steroids," observes Professor Ally. "Now that we have a better understanding of how the disease process works, we can target the specific mechanisms of the immune system responsible for the illness such as the pro-inflammatory cytokines. Using biological agents, we can counteract these immune mechanisms."

The biggest culprit is tumour necrosis factor (TNF). Normally, it functions to block foreign, harmful bacteria from causing infection, but in inflammatory bowel disease, something goes wrong. "We're now able to selectively block TNF, as well as particular cytokines, without involving the whole immune system. These new selective treatments also mean that separately tailored treatments are now available for ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease, which until not too long ago were treated as an entity," he says.

Professor Ally recommends that doctors consult the SAGES website – www.sages.co.za – as it contains much useful information that will help them diagnose and treat their patients optimally. "I also encourage them to attend the SAGES-hosted special events in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town on the evening of World Digestive Health Day, where they can listen to patients' tell the stories of life pre-diagnosis and treatment and how getting optimal therapy revolutionised their quality of life," he concludes.

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