

Gastro Foundation Weekend for Fellows 2012

The third annual Gastro Foundation weekend for Fellows was held from 3 – 5 February 2012. Once again hosted at the exceptional Spier Hotel and Conference Centre in Stellenbosch and sponsored by an educational grant from AstraZeneca, it was a resounding success.

Arriving in Cape Town on Friday morning, we were greeted at the airport by the familiar black-and-gold Gastro Foundation logo being held aloft, beckoning us to our destination. The weather had specifically been ordered for the occasion by Karin Fenton! And it did not disappoint...three glorious days of sunshine in which to bask and learn.

As we arrived in the foyer of Spier Hotel, we were greeted by a sea of friendly faces, some new arrivals and some old friends. There were 25 fellows and approx. 20 faculty and support staff present. For the first time, there were also paediatric gastroenterology trainees as well. We lingered over a light lunch and the obligatory game of croquet (which Prof Thomson won again!) before adjourning to the conference centre for some academic enlightenment. Profs Reid Ally, Sandie Thomson and Michael Kew started off the session with short lectures focussed on encouraging research. These were well-received and sparked lively debate.

The now-notorious team quiz then commenced, pitting teams against each other and the faculty in a quick-fire challenge testing knowledge and memory. Prof Krige was quizmaster and did a sterling job...even if his impartiality did get called into question once or twice! Much rivalry and fun ensued with the faculty snatching a very narrow and much-disputed victory!

The evening meal was a riverside braai. Tables set amongst the trees, lanterns lighting the way and the river babbling gently in the background made for a beautiful end to the day. A generous and varied menu catered for all preferences and we lingered late into the night ending with coffee under the stars.

Day 2 dawned with trepidation. Titled "Bootcamp training in Gastroenterology", the academic programme commenced in earnest and it was not a day for sissies! Filled with 5 stations headed by leading physicians and surgeons from across the



country, it was a tough day. Gastroenterology knowledge was intensively tested and my shortcomings were certainly exposed! There was little room for error and the men were soon separated from the boys as the points were tallied between the teams. But it was also a day of learning and time enough was provided for Q&A sessions as well. The traditional format of base stations worked well again this year and we all left feeling enriched by the days experience.

What ended Day 2's proceedings was an unusual approach to the guest lecture by invited speaker Prof Bongani Mayosi, Head of Medicine at UCT. Instead of giving a talk or presentation, he opted to include us all in a sort of "support-group" style discussion. We literally sat around in a circle and proceeded to introduce ourselves and speak about what motivated us and where we saw ourselves 10 years down the line. It was an eye-opening experience giving us insight into our colleagues lives and we left the session knowing ourselves and each other a little better.

Another sumptuous dinner followed as well as another late night...which explained why we were all a little slow to arrive for Sunday's early morning session. We (quite deservedly) incurred the wrath of Dr Kassianides and I take this opportunity to apologise once again for our tardiness!

Sunday's session was short but exceptional. We had inspiring talks from both Mashiko Setshedi and Richard Hift which were certainly the highlight for me. Personal insights and great advice which uplifted my spirit and made me realize there are no limits, no boundaries to what can be achieved with just a little effort and I resolved even more to succeed in what I had chosen to become.

The short talks by 5 fellows which concluded the session were probably the most popular segment of the weekend. They highlighted the commitment of the Gastro Foundation in promoting training and gave an insight into where South Africa is in comparison to other parts of the globe.

The customary prize-giving at the end led to much good-natured banter and debate but we all returned with a little something to commemorate our visit. A delicious picnic hamper from Spier was the perfect finishing touch as we all bade farewell and headed off to catch our flights.

It was a privilege to have been invited to attend. Not only was the focus on academia and research but also on building relationships and encouraging the pursuit of a fulfilling career. To bask in the reflected glory of individuals who have achieved excellence in their fields was truly inspiring.

My heartfelt thanks to the Gastro Foundation and its sponsors for making this event possible. May it continue to grow from strength to strength. See you next year!

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