

Letters from Amsterdam - Dion Levin

Eight South Africans attended a postgraduate course in the Netherlands in 2004



In the picture taken in Zwolle, Netherlands - Dion Levin (Groote Schuur Hospital), Konrad Botes (Pretoria Academic) , Charles Steyn (Tygerberg Hospital)

On 27 October a group of 35 doctors arrived in Amsterdam for the advanced postgraduate course in gastroenterology.

The two-week course, sponsored by the Holland digestive week, had participants from Bulgaria, Czech republic, Romania and South Africa.

The South African contingent comprised three physicians and five surgeons from Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria.

The first port of call upon arrival at the Amsterdam Central station was the Hotel San Luchasio, located in an upmarket part of Amsterdam on the border of Vondel Park

Before it was converted into a hotel, the building served as a Franciscan monastery. Recently acquired by a young political scientist facing a midlife crisis, the hotel was to become our home for the ten days spent in Amsterdam. The single rooms were tidy and small, but there was certainly enough room for self-flagellation.

The hotel was well chosen, given that it was a 20-minute walk to the Free University, where the first week of the course was held. It was also close to the tram that passed through the famous Leidseplein, home to the infamous Bulldog coffee shop and other equally interesting places.

The Thursday and Friday after our arrival, however, were not spent at the Free, but at the Amsterdam Medical Centre. Here, we attended the European colo-proctology congress. Suitably attired in tailored suits and double cuffs, eminent surgeons from around Europe discussed a range of topics from laproscopic colectomy to setan insertion, much to the delight of our surgical contingent. During the congress we took the opportunity to ask for a tour of the impressive gastrointestinal department, where Professor Tytgat spent much of his professional life.

After a weekend enjoying the sights of the city, the first week began at the Free university under the watchful eye of Professor Chris Mulder, our host for this part of the course. Intensive daily lectures on topics ranging from new and emerging endoscopic techniques, and coeliac disease, to aspects of inflammatory bowel disease, took place from 09h00 to 17h30 daily. These were delivered by various speakers from Amsterdam and other parts of Holland, and made for vigorous debate – certainly amongst the South Africans. Apart from a few participants, the eastern Europeans seldom took part in discussion during this first week. This probably reflected their discomfort with spoken English, as much the fact that many were very early in their careers as medical residents and gastroenterology trainees

Despite this language barrier, the initial awkwardness was soon overcome, friends were made and much was learnt about the politics, economics and lives of the people in eastern Europe. This was certainly a privilege we are unlikely to experience again.

On the second weekend we left Amsterdam and moved to Zwolle, which is located in the north of Holland. A historical town, Zwolle was the centre of trade during the 17th century, when The Netherlands was the most powerful nation in the world, the so-called golden age of the Dutch. A bus tour of the north was organised, with various sightseeing stops en route to Zwolle, home of our host, Professor Fritz Nellis. The course at the Isala Clinic took a similar format to that in Amsterdam. Experts from around Holland gave daily lectures and led discussions about hepatic, pancreatic and colo-rectal topics, and the like.

The unbelievable level of hospitality we were shown surpassed the high quality of talks.

We were accommodated in chalets in the Leemkule, an upmarket holiday resort situated in a forest, complete with hiking and cycling paths. What was even more exceptional was that each evening after our day's lectures, Professor Nellis would accompany us to a different restaurant in the area. Fully catered menus with wine or other beverages of our choice were provided. French, Italian and other cuisine were sampled and for some the gastronomic and beverage education paralleled that of the academic programme

The end of the second week arrived and we returned home, with some sadness at having to part with friends, burdened with a few extra kilograms around the waist and enriched with the knowledge we had gained. The overall experience for me certainly highlighted the academic and

practical strength of gastroenterology in Holland and its high position in European “ if not world “ gastroenterology.

I consider myself very fortunate, both on a personal and a professional level, to have had the opportunity to take part in this course. I would like to thank SAGES and the local sponsors for the tickets. Last, but by no means least, huge thanks must be extended to the Holland Digestive Week foundation and Professors Chris Mulder and Fritz Nellis for making this a memorable experience.

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SAGES is grateful for the part sponsorship received from the following to fund the airtickets for the eight South African™s who attended the post graduate course in the Netherlands.

