



DIVISION OF HEPATOLOGY

Paving the way for hepatologists in Africa



Professor
Wendy Spearman
Head of Hepatology

Over the past 20 years, both the burden of liver disease and the complexity of available treatment modalities have increased significantly – but the Division of Hepatology has risen to the challenge by creating a state-of-the-art department that is taken seriously not only in Africa but also in Europe and the US.

For Professor Wendy Spearman, Head of Hepatology, it is no small feat that the division has the only active porphyria service on the African continent with a combined diagnostic, therapeutic and research unit.

“Our team, together with colleagues from the USA and Wales were responsible for discovering the R59W gene defect responsible for variegate porphyria in South Africa.” She says new patients presenting with porphyria are offered a full biochemical diagnostic evaluation as well as genomic assessment.



Doctors Henry Hairwadzi (left) and Mashiko Setshedi (right) at work in the Liver Laboratory.

Professor Spearman is also proud of the fact that the division is the only place in South Africa to provide a dedicated liver service focusing on hepatology and liver transplantation in the public sector.

“The Liver Unit acts as a national referral centre for assessment of patients with both acute and chronic liver disease as well as for liver transplantation, in addition to providing a full-time telephonic consulting service on the management of acute and chronic liver disease.”

Professor Spearman stresses the importance of having a holistic approach to the management of liver

disease. “The clinical profile of patients admitted with liver disease has changed with HIV and associated liver disease and drug-induced liver injuries increasing,” she says. “Consequently, the clinical demand for specialised liver services has increased.”

New developments in the field include the advancements in treatment modalities including immunosuppression and antivirals, which have significantly changed the outcomes of many liver diseases such as autoimmune hepatitis and viral hepatitis, particularly if patients are referred and diagnosed early. Chronic hepatitis B can now be controlled with vaccination and is



Members of the Division of Hepatology: Back row, from left to right: Professor Peter Meissner, Fozia Francis, Doctor Mark Sonderup, Doctor Anne Corrigan, and Doctor Mashiko Setshedi. Front row, from left to right: Brandon Davidson, Doctor Neliswa Gogela, Professor Wendy Spearman, and Doctor Henry Hairwadzi.

potentially eradicable and chronic hepatitis C is potentially curable.

But Professor Spearman points out, “Many challenges still exist in terms of access to treatment, both in the state and private sector. The cost of newer curative antiviral treatment for chronic hepatitis C is unaffordable for most South Africans.”

She takes courage, however, from the many good things achieved by her division; like the first liver transplant, combined liver-kidney transplant and living-related liver transplant in Africa, all of which were undertaken by the division’s transplant surgeons.

“Our long-term survival figures for both adult and paediatric liver transplantation are excellent (overall 10-year survival figures greater than 65%), with a number of recipients surviving more than 20 years.”

Although transplantation is established as the treatment of choice for end-stage liver disease, the timeous access to donors, particularly for patients presenting with fulminant or subfulminant liver failure, has become increasingly difficult.

She also notes that the Liver Unit has successfully tested a novel bioartificial liver (human liver-derived cell line) developed by the University College of London Institute for Liver and Digestive Health, in an acute ischaemic liver failure animal model. The next phase, which is supported by a Wellcome Trust Grant, involves testing the clinical prototype in the animal model before embarking on clinical studies.

In order to address the need for trained hepatologists, an MPhil in Hepatology and Liver Transplantation has been registered and the HPCSA has approved subspecialty training in Hepatology.

It is important to think ahead, says Professor Spearman. “We are also in the process of establishing a one-year diploma programme in Clinical Hepatology, which is aimed at qualified medical practitioners both from South Africa as well as from other countries within Africa, enabling them to diagnose and initiate appropriate management and referral of patients with acute and chronic liver diseases in resource limited areas.”