

Amsterdam Live Endoscopy 2009

When I settled my buzzing head on the seat of Royal Dutch Airlines flight KL 592, scheduled for 00h45 on the 9th of December 2009, I realised how close I had been to missing the plane. Like some of my colleagues, I had correctly noted the date of departure, but had failed to notice that it was in fact an early morning flight and not an evening flight as I had assumed on carelessly scanning over my e-ticket some days before. Of course, now the rush was over, I was on the plane and my mobile phone was off. Soon I would be cruising 10 km above Africa, to the land of clogs and tulips, and there was nothing that anyone could do about it. I was unavailable. As it turned out the flight was uneventful and we disembarked at Schiphol airport in Amsterdam, to face the extremely business like immigration police. Like good South Africans we were not daunted-security is our middle name. Having provided all the correct answers we were finally on our way to the long awaited and most essential of early morning indulgences-the first cup of coffee. A cup of Dutch coffee, masterfully brewed (the Dutch certainly have standards), and the smell of smoggy winter air outside the terminal building and we knew we were in Europe.

Novotel Amsterdam was a short drive from the airport, on what one would consider the outskirts of Amsterdam - how you tell the difference I would not know-buildings everywhere. Having said that, architecture here is impressive; a symbol of a progressive thinking nation. The hotel itself was perfectly situated near the conference venue and the nearest tram to the city centre was five minutes on foot from the front door. We spent the rest of the day settling in and recovering from the flight. We discovered very quickly how not to arrange a group outing on a tram-that is with half the group inside the tram and the other half on the pavement discussing whether this was in fact the correct tram. The tram unexpectedly left and half the group stayed behind. Fortunately cellular technology and an agreed-upon rendezvous point solved this little glitch. Besides, we are grown-ups - nothing better than being lost in a foreign country.



The days following our arrival were packed with activity. A visit to the VU (Vrije Universiteit) Amsterdam Academic Hospital, started with a tour of their state of the art gastroenterology unit. Professor Chris Mulder, who has had a long association with gastroenterology in South Africa, met us personally, took us on a guided tour and hosted us for lunch. Following this he spent 2 hours discussing variations in gastroenterology training across the world, with specific interest in our own training. Gastroenterology training in the Netherlands is 4 years and preceded by 2 years of general medicine only. This is the inverse of our training program. The afternoon was interactive and we had the opportunity to ask questions and comment. His keen interest was obvious and the fact that he took the time to spend with us, out of a busy schedule, is a sign of a true believer. The following day was spent at what is considered a secondary hospital, further north. We encountered something quite different from our usual concept of secondary level medicine. The gastroenterology unit, by the mere nature of it's service commitment, was busier than the academic unit, and the unit was equally well equipped. Endoscopes were literally filed in back-to-back cabinets. Here as at the VU Amsterdam, we learned that the Netherlands has a shortage of qualified gastroenterologists and more training posts than trainees.

Amsterdam Live endoscopy, is an annual meeting, hosted by the AMC (academic Medical Centre) Amsterdam, and attended by between 400 and 500 delegates. Expert endoscopists from Europe, the USA and Japan congregate to demonstrate their particular skills, which included a full range of endoscopic procedures and interventions involving difficult ERCP, EUS guided interventions, upper and lower GI endoscopy with endoscopic mucosal resection (EMR) and endoscopic sub-mucosal dissection (ESD) of difficult lesions, to mention a few. This was then televised to the audience and viewed on multiple large screens at the conference centre, over a period of 2 full days. Lunchtime break-out sessions were available to learn about the management of particular situations. One particularly interesting session discussed the



use of a double-balloon enteroscopy, to perform ERCP in patients with a surgically modified GI tract for instance after bariatric surgery. Of course there many more, but these ran concurrently and one had to make a choice. Break times were opportunities to meet up with colleagues who were not travelling with us. Viewing the state-of-the art can be both motivating and troubling. I am sure I am not alone when I say that one is just a little envious, when one witnesses some of the demonstrated skills-so much to learn, so little time.

But, all work and no play... you know what they say. There is more to Amsterdam than hospitals and endoscopes. Those of us who felt energetic enough arose early and went for a morning jog. This is when one realises that Amsterdam is the greatest place in the world to jog if you are an amateur. Apart from the elevation from road to curb, the terrain is absolutely flat. I would have expected nothing less from Dutch precision. This too extended to the surrounding landscape, which was not only level, but devoid of any characteristic which had not been placed there by human hands. The landscape is stark, but charming and reminiscent in places of a Bruegel masterpiece. A visit to a traditional Dutch village, complete with windmills and clog factory, created a sense of just how stark life must have been a century or two ago. At times like these one is grateful that the "good old days" are gone. Contemporary Amsterdam itself is a world on its own, whether



you fancy the architecture, a visit to the Van Gogh museum, a Dutch cigar in a small pub or just a lazy stroll next to a canal. It is a place of paradoxes. European law prohibits smoking in bars and restaurants, but a sole proprietor may authorise smoking in his own establishment, if he is the only employee. There's one for civil liberty. As for the practicalities of living our every need was seen to. Tendani Ramovha and Pepe Sefike from AstraZeneca, were great company and excellent hosts.

The only down side to the experience was the fact that we had to eventually part ways, return home and face the realities there, like a cell phone. Fortunately Schipol airport has one of the world's best duty free sections and this eased the pain somewhat. And just how bad can a parting cup of coffee be while one is waiting to board a plane. The flight back was for some of us extremely comfortable (seated with optimal legroom) and the view over the Alps was stunning. And to quote the immortal words of a colleague - "We'll always have Amsterdam".

It remains for us (the Fellows) to thank the Gastro Foundation and AstraZeneca, for their kind arrangement and sponsorship of this valuable experience.

Text by Otto Buchel
Photographs by Fikile Nomvete

